

The PIVOT



THE CHRONICLES OF
**JONATHAN
SPENCER**
BOOK 2

The
PIVOT

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JONATHAN SPENCER

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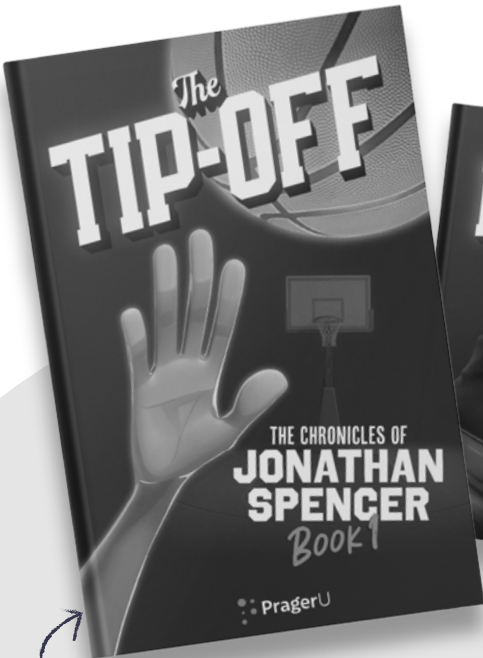
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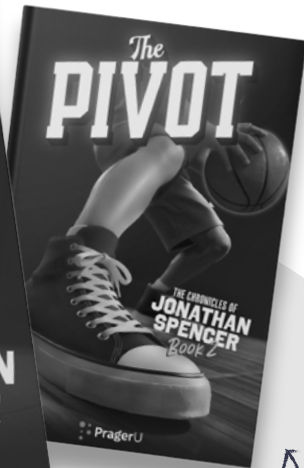
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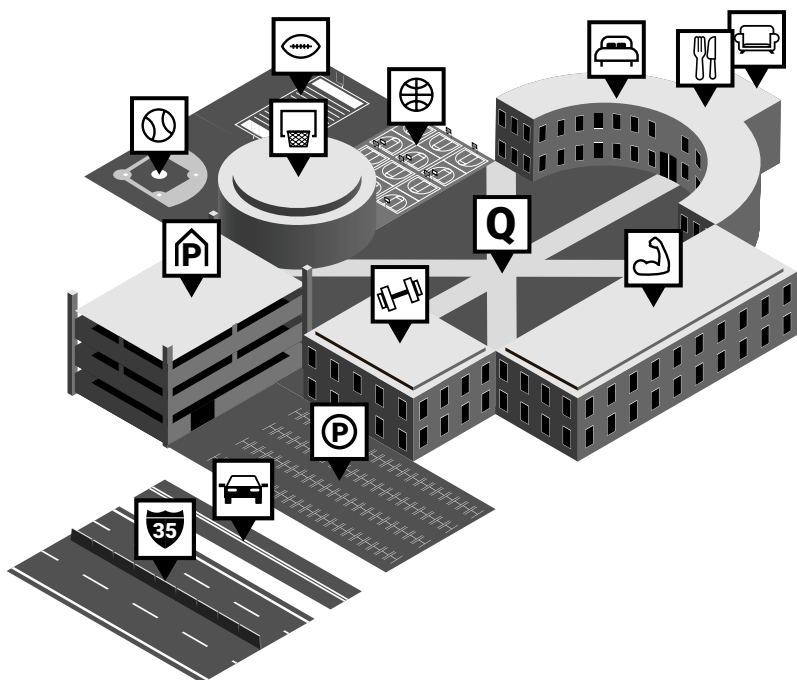
BOOK 1 -
THE TIP-OFF



BOOK 2 -
THE PIVOT

GREAT PLAINS UNIVERSITY

CAMPUS MAP



 I-35

 FOOTBALL FIELD

 BASEBALL FIELD

 PARKING LOT

 ROGER K. SCHOOL OF KINESIOLOGY

Q THE QUAD

 ATHLETICS COMPLEX

 JAMES GYM

 PARKING GARAGE

 CAFETERIA

 STUDENT LOUNGE

 PRACTICE COURTS

 GRAND PRAIRIE PKWY

 MCMURTRY BUILDING

CHAPTER

01



Coach Robinson's whistle pierces the gym. He motions for the last two five-man squads to take the court after our time out.

It's only the final minute of sixth-grade Boys Athletics, but I'm hyped like it's the end of the NBA finals.

I'm not the only one who's stoked to play, either.

Across the court, Trey 'Slammo' Matthews sprints to center court. "Come ON! Let's go Blue!" His Slammo sidekicks, Jaron Oakes and Wes Hawkins, are on his team.

I'm on the White team with Mason, Devon, Keaton, and Cole. All of us are still for a moment, anticipating Coach's whistle.

REET!

Lane in-bounds to Keaton, who easily dribbles around Wes and whips a pass to Mason in the corner.

"Defense, Blue!"

"C'mon, White!"

I catch Mason's eye, and it's like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. Probably because he does know exactly what I'm thinking. We ran this play a thousand times this season at Little Cougars just a couple of months ago.

I blink and Slammo's on me. I act like I'm ready to rebound, but then slip to the three-point line. Mason's short, but he's quick, and in a split second, he leaves Jaron in the corner. He drives hard and fast to the baseline and tosses the ball to me at the top of the key.

The ball rests softly on my right fingertips, left hand vertical like a bookend.

It's automatic now.

Inhale.

Shoot.

Follow-through.

Just like I'm reaching into a cookie jar for a sweet, sweet treat. Exactly like Grandad taught me.

The ball sails high through the air, backspinning tight, then splashes through the basket.

Swish!

The White team sideline is in a frenzy now.

"Beautiful, Spencer!" Coach Robinson shouts from the sidelines. "Blue, you're down three points with thirty seconds left. Go for a quick two or get a three lined up."

Slammo scowls, but he doesn't say a word as he sets up for offense.

Ever since I stood up to him in the locker room last fall, things have been different with me and the Slammo crew. Don't get me wrong, we'll never be best friends or anything. Aside from roasting me for my awesome socks, he and his crew pretty much leave me alone.

He and the rest of the Slammos are still obnoxious—they're still all about getting those views on their TikTok and YouTube. But they've moved on from stuffing unsuspecting kids into lockers and filming their reactions. Now, they dump pudding into lockers and film it. I guess that's progress.

Slammo passes to Jaron, who passes it right back. I get low and wide, ready to block a drive. He could go for three, but instead, he tries a crossover dribble to get around me.

Slammo leaves his dribble high, I spot an opportunity for a steal, and I take it.

Thank you.

Muscle memory kicks in, and my size fourteen feet push my legs into overdrive.

The rest of our Boys Athletics class counts down to the final buzzer: "SEVEN! SIX! FIVE!"

I sail down court. . .

"FOUR! THREE! TWO!"

. . . and sink a layup, soft off the glass. We finish five points ahead of the Blue team.

BUZZZZ!

Man, does it feel amazing.

The gym explodes in cheers. A sweaty Mason nearly levels me with a rushing tackle from across the court.

Slammo and his crew elbow their way over and stop just shy of getting in my face. “You might have won this time, Baby Socks, but we’ll see who’s the star around here in 7th grade.” One corner of Slammo’s mouth curls up in a slow grin.

“Uh. Dude. Are you trying to be creepy right now? Because you’re really creepy when you do that thing with your mouth.” Mason does a hilarious impression of Slammo’s grin that makes him look like a duck, and everybody around us cracks up.

Slammo’s shoulders rise almost to his earlobes, and he and his cronies step closer, but Coach Robinson calls us to center court for one last huddle.

“Great work this year, fellas.” Coach folds his arms across his chest and looks me square in the eyes. “You’ve had a fantastic 6th-grade year. Keep building on that momentum. Have fun this summer, but don’t get lazy, and hoop as much as you can. Ballers are made in the summer. Tryouts will be here before you know it, and next year is when things get real. Hold yourself accountable and work hard.”

A chorus of “Yes, Coach” rings out across the gym.

“I’m proud of all of you. Now get outta here and clean up for second period. Except you, Matthews. I need a word, please.” Coach holds one arm wide, calling Slammo, and waves the rest of us toward the locker room.

“Slammo’s going to be out for ree-vennnge next year.” Mason rubs his hands together like a cartoon supervillain and chuckles. “Talk about a sore loser. It’s his

own fault he didn't protect the ball on the last play."

"Yeah." He's not wrong. Slammo won't make it easy on us next year. I stumble over my own foot in the hallway and plant both hands on the wall to keep from falling over. "Guess we'll just have to work hard and be ready."

"You mean you'll be ready mister big-shot-got-invited to the Oklahoma Elite summer camp." Mason shakes his head, sending beads of sweat flying into the crowd as we shuffle down the corridor. "While you're shooting hoops, I'll be cutting lawns in good ole Tulsa."

I hold the door open for the guys behind us, make my way to my locker, and grab my gear. "You know if you weren't going to Tulsa, you'd be the other Collins player. Coach invited you too." I throw my backpack over my shoulder, pull up my newest pair of Oklahoma state flag socks, and head toward the exit.

Mason grins. "I know. Not like I had much of a choice. Mom wants me to spend more time with her and my stepdad." He closes his locker. "It's cool though. You know what? All that yard work? I'm gonna come back a foot taller and totally jacked." Mason flexes what could maybe pass for biceps.

I lift my chin, stretch out to my full 6'4" height, and pretend to flex my beanpole arms. "Dude, next to me, you are jacked."

The bell rings, and we take our scrimmage victory and big summer plans to the next class.

When I first came to Collins Middle School, I had no idea how I was going to fit in. After the first day, I wasn't sure I was even going to fit in at all. Especially with the way the Slammos kind of locked in on me.

But look at me now—at the top of my game and getting better by the minute.

Coach is right, as usual. It's been a great year.

CHAPTER



Mrs. Fenoglio scans the room from her desk. She's expecting a baby any day, so she teaches from her chair. This afternoon, she sits with a bowl of apple slices perched on her belly and a gallon jug of water within reach.

Mason leans toward me. "Did you get the permission form signed?"

We've been reading *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Since everybody passed the exam on Tuesday, Mrs. F said we could watch the movie in class if we got a permission form signed that says we can watch the fight scene. As much as Mason and I enjoy a good fight scene, we'd rather talk in the library than sit quietly and watch a movie.

I shake my head. "You?"

Mason mashes his eyebrows down and gives me a why-would-I-do-that look and high-fives me across the aisle as the bell rings.

Mrs. F wipes a sweaty, curly lock of hair from her forehead and takes another swig from her water jug.

“Hello, favorite class. Who’s ready to watch a classic movie?”

About half the class claps.

“If you don’t have a signed permission form to watch, raise your hand.”

The other half of the class, Mason and me included, raise our hands.

Mrs. F exhales loudly and shakes her head. “Seriously? Okay.” She counts hands, pointing a thin apple slice at each of us, one by one. When she gets to me and Mason, she stops.

“Not you too, Jonathan? Mason? You’re gonna miss the movie?”

Mason shrugs.

Next to Coach Robinson, Mrs. F is tied with Mrs. Nonna for the title of ‘Jonathan’s Favorite Teacher.’ But even Favorite Teacher status isn’t enough to make me want to watch thirty minutes of a movie, no matter how good the book was.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

Mrs. F sighs extra loud and flashes a super exaggerated eye roll. “I guess that’s fine. I was looking forward to one more of our class discussions.”

“No offense, ma’am, but didn’t we cover everything in our exam?” Eleanor Warner asks.

Our teacher pushes herself forward and sets the now-empty bowl on her desk. “Exam or no exam, great literature is always worthy of discussion.” She pulls a stack of library passes out of her desk draw-

er, winks, and waves us forward. “That’s fine. You’re leaving more learning for the rest of us.”

I get to the front of the line, and Mrs. F holds the library pass behind her back. “What do you think the Greasers versus the Socs rivalry is really about, Jonathan?”

Her question catches me off guard. There’s a long, uncomfortable silence, but it’s not because I haven’t thought about her question before. I actually really liked the book, even if I did skim some of the parts because I was tired. “I think it shows the way rivalries can either bring out the best in people or the worst.”

My ears and neck heat up the way they do whenever I say anything in class.

Mrs. Fenoglio grins ear to ear and hands me the pass. “Okay then. Enjoy the library. And your summer. And maybe watch the movie with your family this summer. I think you’d like it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I flash her my best, widest smile, snag my freedom pass, and zip down the corridor.

“Slow down, man, we’re not on the court.” Mason jogs to keep up.

“I can’t help that you’re short, dude.” I also can’t help that I grew another four inches this school year. I decelerate.

“Thanks, man.” Mason’s face lights up as he smacks my arm. “Race ya.” He laughs and sprints around the corner.

“Nice.” I launch after him.

I take two long strides and slam into Mason’s back.

“Hey, what the heck?”

Mason points to the other end of the hall.

In my nine months at CMS, I’ve avoided our Vice Principal, Mr. Elliott. He’s in charge of student discipline, and people say he is super serious about his job. The kids call him “VP Rojo.” At first, I thought they were probably exaggerating about how red his hair and beard are.

They weren’t.

A man in a pumpkin-colored shirt with a head full of hair the color of a ripe mango stands in front of the library door. A line of kids, passes in hand, snakes past the lockers.

Most of the teachers here are pretty chill, but if anybody’s going to keep us after school for running in the halls on the last day, it’s VP Rojo. At least we have our library passes. I heard that if you get busted without a hall pass, you have to take out the cafeteria trash.

Every bone in my body is itching to run full out, but I put on the brakes and walk. It feels awkward, heavy, and annoyingly slow.

“Check it out.” Mason juts his chin toward the left side of the hallway. “By the band room.” In the corner, hidden from Rojo’s view, are three shadowy figures. “Slammos think they’re being sly.”

I nudge Mason forward. “They’re just bitter they lost to us. Again.”

Mason nods. “Yep.”

I push my shoulders back and lift my chin as we pass the Slammos’ hiding spot and join the line of kids at

the library.

“Afternoon, fellas.” VP Rojo extends a freckled hand. “You must be the up-and-coming basketball player. Spencer, right? And you’re Mason Barnes.”

How does he know my name? My cheeks burn. “Sir? Uh. Yes. I am Spencer. Sir.”

Mason nudges me and shakes the VP’s hand, then hands him his library pass. He looks up at me with wide eyes, like if he could shout, “Get it together, dude,” he would.

I reach into my pocket.

It’s empty.

How is it empty? Where’d my pass go?

Sweat erupts from my forehead.

“Coach Robinson’s told me a lot about both of you. Any big summer plans?”

“Uh. . . .” I pat the sides of my shorts, hoping to feel paper crinkle beneath my fingers. Nothing.

Mason elbows me, and I nod, like *I know I’m supposed to answer his question, but words are not wording right now*. In my head, I’m saying “Basketball camp.” But my mouth is not available at the moment. The rest of my body is busy preparing to collect cafeteria trash because I can’t find my library pass.

“I’m working for my stepdad’s landscaping business and hanging out with my Mom in Tulsa.” Mason walks to the library door.

“Sounds industrious, mister Barnes.” VP Rojo smiles

up at me kindly. “No pass, no library, mister Spencer.”

Where did my pass go? “It was right here a minute ago, sir—”

“Hey, Jon!” Riley the red-headed cheerleader pops in right next to my elbow, and I jump what feels like a mile.

What is it with this girl and showing up when I’m at my dorkiest?

“You dropped this outside of Mrs. Fenoglio’s room.” Riley presses the library pass into my hand, and air returns to my lungs. “Hey, Mr. Elliott.”

Riley to the rescue. Just like in the cafeteria last fall when she helped me escape the wrath of the Slammos.

“Miss Ashford. Very kind of you to help mister Spencer, but if you’ve got a library pass, wait your turn.”

Riley smiles one of her usual light-up-her-whole-face smiles. “No problem. I’m happy to help. I’m actually not going to the library. I’m an office aide this period.” She flashes a badge dangling from a lanyard around her neck to prove her point.

“Thanks, Riley.” I shrug my backpack over my shoulders and hand the slip of paper to VP Rojo.

“See you after school.” Riley takes off down the hall, her blue-bowed braids bobbing with each skip.

Mason shakes his head, his mouth open like his jaw could fall clean off any minute.

VP Rojo waves me toward the library door, then his expression sours faster than week-old milk. “Mister Matthews, Oakes, Hawkins. Did you think I wouldn’t

hand out detention just because it's the last day of school? Get back to class, gentlemen, or you'll find yourselves picking up trash in the bus line this afternoon."

"Ouch. That's gotta hurt." I stroll into the library, wincing.

"Yeah. But also. *See you after school?*" Mason walks backward across the library, making goofy faces at me as we shuffle past the comfy reading chairs. "Do y'all have plans you didn't tell me about?"

I open my eyes extra big and lower my chin the way my dad does when he's saying something he wants me to understand. "No. Way. It's not *that* kind of 'see you after school.' You know Riley. She's just a friendly person. That's all."

"Mhm. Whatever dude." Mason spins around and drops into a seat at our favorite table in the corner, shaking his head. "Maaaaarrrrrggghhh. Why are we even here?" He plunks his forehead onto the blue plastic. "This is the longest day. What am I learning?"

"Technically, the longest day in North America is the Summer Solstice." I drop my backpack and slide into a seat across the table from my uncharacteristically dramatic best friend.

Mason kicks my feet without looking up. "No. The longest day in North America is the last day of the school year. Period. Change my mind."

"You win." I rub my chin like Dad does when he's thinking. "You have to admit, Coach's scrimmage was fire, though."

"I will admit that." Mason sits up tall—well, tall for

him, he's only 5'6"—and mimes shooting across the room with perfect cookie jar follow-through. "The best part was the look on Slammo's face when you made that last shot. It was—" He mimes a chef's kiss.

They're totally going to be looking for revenge next year. The last thing the Slammos want to do is come in second place to Baby Socks.

The good news is that, even if today feels like an eternity, even if the Slammos want to get revenge for losing the scrimmage, it's like Coach says. After all the ups and downs, I'm finishing the year strong.

And, unlike the first day of school, today I have a best friend to share it with.

CHAPTER



Somehow, by the grace of God, we make it to Mrs. Nonna's Culinary Arts class. Our last class of the day.

Culinary Arts is a fancy way of saying 'cooking class.' Next to Athletics, it's my favorite class because, duh, food. Why wouldn't I want to learn to cook, especially when I get to eat whatever I make?

I should have known Mrs. Nonna would go over the top. She's draped blue and white paper streamers along the cabinets at the back of the room, moved our desks into the center of the room, and shoved four worktables together along one wall to make a buffet.

Mason and I shoot confused glances at each other, then to Lainey Hildner and Asher McCullough. "Nonna said we're having a tasting party today," Asher hooks a thumb toward one of the sets of double ovens on the opposite side of the room.

"Are we gonna cook?" My mouth waters.

"No, but you get to eat." Mrs. Nonna opens one of the ovens and the room fills with the buttery aroma of fresh-baked bread, and—is that cinnamon sugar?

“You all have been such a great class. I made a few of your favorite recipes to celebrate.” Mrs. Nonna pulls two big pans of cinnamon rolls out of an oven and sets them on the counter.

“Aw, yeah.” Mason closes his eyes and inhales deep. “I love this day.”

“I need some volunteers. Who wants to help?”

Everyone raises their hand, including me and Mason.

The tardy bell hasn't even rung yet, and most of the class has washed their hands and is ready to get to work.

Lainey piles sausage rolls onto a silver tray while Asher spoons homemade hummus into bowls. Macy fills pitchers with lemonade, and Patrick makes neat stacks of crackers next to steaming bowls of chili-topped queso. While they work, Mrs. Nonna sets out a plate stacked high with one of my favorites: lemon cupcakes.

Mason's job is to watch the timer on the chocolate chip pecan cookies and take them out of the oven. My job is to glob heaping spoonfuls of cream cheese frosting on the cinnamon rolls while they're still piping hot.

Then, it's time to eat.

Mason and I load our plates and examine our snack haul. “Don't get used to eating like this,” he says between bites of queso. “I heard the food at Oklahoma Elite is all green smoothies and dry protein bars.”

“No way. For real?” I take a long swig of icy lemonade. “That's gotta be a joke.”

“There's actually an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

I dunk a cookie into a giant glob of cream cheese frosting and pop it into my mouth. "Sweet!"

"Yup. With how much you eat, they're gonna wish they never saw you coming."

I high-five him, and we sit in silence for a minute, chewing on chocolatey-soft-on-the-inside, crispy-pecan-crusty-on-the-outside cookies and imagining piles and piles of desserts.

"Who do you think the other CMS player is?" I ask. I wipe my fingers with a paper napkin and unwrap a lemon cupcake.

"I dunno," Mason says with his mouth full of chocolate pecan cookie.

"Come on, if Coach has to send two guys, who do you think it'll be?"

Mason thinks for a second. "Lane. He's fast, he's good from three. He just needs to work on defense. That's who I'd send."

I tear my cupcake in half to see if Mrs. Nonna stuffed it with lemon cream. She did. She's the best. "Yeah, but Lane goes to cross country camp up in Nebraska every summer."

"Maybe Coach won't even send a second guy." Mason kicks my chair gently as he gets up to get a lemonade refill.

If it's not Mason, and it's not Lane, I don't know who else Coach Robinson would send to the Elites.

We help Mrs. Nonna clean up the decorations and load the dishwasher, then gather in a sugar-filled frenzy at the classroom door for the agonizing last

minutes until summer officially begins. Patrick and Lainey are singing goofy songs from show choir, Asher and a couple of the other guys are playing “soccer” with a wadded-up clump of paper, and Mrs. Nonna stands with a tray of leftover cookies and cupcakes, distributing them in handfuls.

This is it. Less than a minute. Mason and I wait a few seconds and start the countdown.

“Ten, nine. . . .” I’m pumping my fist in the air, and Mason’s bouncing on his toes.

Asher joins in. “Eight, seven. . . .”

Then the rest of the class, all of us shouting at the top of our lungs.

Until BEEEEEP.

The last bell of sixth grade rings. We’re done! The whole summer is ahead of us!

Mrs. Nonna flings the classroom door open. “Good luck in 7th grade! Have a great summer!”

Mason and I rush into the hallway along with everyone else.

“Wooo! Peace out, CMS!” Mason boogies down the notebook-paper-covered hall. People are tossing worksheets and old notes into the air like confetti. I step on a stack of notebook paper, and my foot slides so far I’m nearly doing the splits. I scramble back to my feet and hustle to catch up with Mason.

Down the hall, we hear VP Rojo barking orders. “Use the receptacles, people! You! Pick that up and walk it to the bin where it belongs!”

Summer, in all its glory, has officially begun.

CHAPTER

04

A large, bold, black number '04' is centered on the page. A silver coin with a dark center is resting on the top of the '4', slightly overlapping the '0'.

On a scale of one to ten, the noise in the hallways is 17. Mason and I weave our way between groups of people, some shrieking and high-fiving each other, others lugging instruments in one hand and looking at their phones with the other, and more than a few dumping their backpacks in the middle of the tiled walkways.

It's like being trapped in a living pinball machine, bouncing between obstacles and noises until we get to the exit doors. Only there're no piles of slick plastic folders to slip on inside pinball machines. I nearly wipe out three more times before we make it to the doors.

Outside, it's less noisy but still chaotic. Mason and I dodge kids on scooters and bikes as we make our way across the main yard.

The pickup line for Bus 527 is still short when we join it.

SMACK! A frisbee hits me in the head and clatters to the pavement. I bend down to retrieve it, rubbing the side of my head with the palm of my hand.

“Sorry, bro!” The frisbee’s owner holds out his hand, and I return the plastic disk.

He stares up at me with wide eyes.

Next to me, Mason mutters, “Wait for it.”

I shake my head, warning him don’t start.

“You’re. . . SO tall,” Frisbee Kid says. “I thought I could get it over you.”

Not again. I don’t get hit on the head with a frisbee every week, but I do get comments about my height. A lot. It used to bug me, but I’m kind of used to standing out. Plus, Mason thinks it’s hilarious. I smile politely and shake my head. “No worries, man.”

Frisbee Kid takes a couple steps backward, staring at me, then turns and races back to his friend on the lawn.

Mason inhales deep, tries to compose himself. “I know, I know, it’s not nice to laugh. It’s just, *man*, it never stops being funny. Next year, with all the new 6th graders, it’s gonna be even better.”

“Laugh it up, short guy.”

Somebody taps my left elbow. “Hey, Jon! Happy summer break!”

Well, at least this time she missed me getting smacked in the head with a frisbee. *Or did she?*

“Heeeey, Ryeee-leeeee! Look, Jon! Riley!” Mason grins from ear to ear. Riley smiles kindly at him, then looks up at me.

“Is it true you were invited to Oklahoma Elite?”

My mouth drops open, and I'm pretty sure I just sweat through my T-shirt. "How did you. . . ?" I throw a questioning look at Mason, and he aggressively shakes his head like, *It wasn't me, dude. I didn't tell her.*

She adjusts one strap of her backpack. "Office aides hear things. So it's true, then?"

"Yeah."

"Well, congrats!" She bounces on her toes. "It's like I said, remember? Star player."

I don't know why, but I kind of like that she calls me that. "You know Mason was invited too, but he can't go."

"Going to my Mom's." Mason nods.

"Cool." She doesn't even spare Mason a glance, she's so laser-focused on me. "Here." She grabs my hand and slides something warm and soft over my wrist. "Just so you don't forget me over the summer. Have fun at camp." She flashes a trademark Riley smile and bounds into the crowd to rejoin her friends.

What just happened?

I stare at the blue circle of poofy fabric wrapped around my wrist.

Before I can demand a translation from Mason, a sharp shoulder bumps into my chest. I turn around to Slammo.

"Oops. Sorry, Baby Socks. I didn't see you there."

Jeez, not this again. "Better get your eyes checked, Slammo, cause you didn't see me this morning in the scrimmage either," I shoot back.

“You got lucky,” Slammo sneers. “Next time, I won’t go so easy on you. And that day is coming sooner than you think.”

With that ominous warning, Trey bumps me again as he turns to leave. I catch a comment he says under his breath. “Can’t be Coach’s pet forever.”

What does he mean by that? Does this have something to do with what he and Coach talked about after class today?

Mason pulls me forward toward the waiting bus.

CHAPTER

05



“He’s just messing with you. From here on out, we have entered a Slammo-free zone.” Mason dodges an abandoned tuba case and steps onto Bus 527 just as Captain Warp Speed leans on the horn.

I drop into the bench seat next to Mason and brace myself for the last wild bus ride of the year. The bus smells both sweet and sweaty, like the elementary kids had PE and ate fruit snacks all afternoon. Even with the weird smell and the chaotic energy, I’m kind of excited about the ride home.

“Let’s get this party started.” The Captain cranks the door closed, and everyone cheers—especially the elementary kids. They’re packed into the front rows, shouting and screaming like they’re at a Jasmine Cunningham concert.

There’s a heavy thump from the driver’s seat as The Captain slams his foot on the accelerator. Everybody cheers and shouts as the bus races across the parking lot, shoving us flat against the back of our seats.

My brother Alec flings his hands up over his head, like he’s on a rollercoaster waiting for the big drop. I

can't see Ian's face, but I bet he's grinning from ear to ear. Behind them, my sister Sarah and her best friend Mari scramble to fix their hair into ponytails on top of their heads.

The bus sails over a speed bump, and one of the little kids up front shouts, "We're *flying!*"

Mason's face lights up, and he smacks my arm. "Hey. So, you have a girlfriend now?" We slide hard against the wall as the bus veers into our neighborhood.

I push myself off the wall with one hand and gently-ish shove Mason back to his side of the seat with the other. "No. I do *not* have a girlfriend."

He tugs at the blue thing wrapped around my wrist. "Uh, yeah you do. Riley gave you her scrunchie."

"So?" I feel my face getting hot. "That doesn't mean she's my girlfriend."

"Yes, it totally does. You're a marked man." He points at the hair thing on my wrist. "You've got to wear that all the time now so other girls know to back off."

"What? No. That's not a thing." *There's no way that's real.*

Mason leans closer. "My stepsister told me all about it." He sits back in the seat and crosses his arms. "It's a thing."

I take this information in and roll it around in my brain for a minute.

Is that how being boyfriend/girlfriend works? Don't I get a say in whether I have a girlfriend or not?

Maybe she likes me?

Which is kind of cool. I wouldn't want to hurt her feelings. Riley is really pretty. And sometimes when she walks by, I can smell her pineapple and coconut shampoo. It's nice. She's nice. Everybody likes Riley. I like Riley. But do I *like her*, like her?

I don't know.

Captain Warp Speed screeches to a halt at our stop. Mason climbs off the bus ahead of me, and while his back is to me, I slide the blue hair tie off my wrist and stuff it into my backpack.

"You wanna come by later and shoot some hoops?" I ask Mason.

"Can't. Dad wants a family dinner before we go to Tulsa."

"Jonathan! Ian wants to go home already." Sarah yells, and I give her a thumbs up.

"Have fun at camp. And, uh, good luck with the ladies." Mason grins and gives me a fist bump.

"Ha, ha," I say.

In a few strides, I catch up to Sarah and the sibling train. From my vantage point, I have the perfect view of my sister's swishing ponytail...held in place by a light pink scrunchie. I've never noticed these things until today, and suddenly, BOOM, they're everywhere.

The words blurt out of my mouth before I can stop them. "Hey Sarah, that thing you use to hold back your hair—what does it mean when a girl gives that to a guy? Does it mean she likes him?"

Sarah whips around to face me, walking backward on

the sidewalk. Her face is serious. “No,” she says, then starts giggling. “It means she *like likes* him.”

I groan. Mason was right. I’m a marked man.

CHAPTER



“I think Wrangler knows today’s the last day of school.” Sarah kneels on the tile next to the front door as our black and white labraterrier covers her with slobbery kisses. “Look at him. He’s so happy we’re home.”

“He’s always happy we’re home.” Ian slunks past, drops his backpack on the floor, and plops face down on the couch.

“Yay! Summer break!” Alec flings his backpack into the corner, stuffs his hands under his armpits, and struts around like a rooster. “Ian, dance party!”

Ian doesn’t budge. “No, thank you.”

“More dancin’ for me.” Alec discos his way upstairs, then stops halfway. “Ooh, Ian! What about Legos? We can build something. You wanna?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong with you, grumpy pants?” Sarah stands, wipes her hands on the back of her jeans, and walks over to Ian on the couch. She pokes the back of

his head, teasing him in a sing-song voice. "Come on. Where's your smile?"

"Stop it. Please." Ian mutters. "I'm tired."

"Sare-uh. Come on." Mari calls from halfway up the staircase.

I open the sliding glass patio door and let Wrangler outside to do his business, then walk to the end of the couch and sit. Ian doesn't protest. "You good, buddy?"

He nods, but doesn't say anything.

One by one, I pull his tiny shoes from his tiny feet and drop them on the floor. I grab one of Mom's throw blankets off the back of the couch and drape it over his legs, and hand him one of the daisy-shaped pillows Mom likes.

Ian stuffs the pillow beneath his head and rolls onto his side. "I might need a little nap."

I think the kid might be right. "Okay, buddy. You nap. I'll go let Wrangler back in."

Wrangler trots inside, hops up onto the couch, and curls into a fuzzy ball behind Ian's knees.

The front door rattles. "Happy summer, gang!" Dad shouts. He carries his grease-splotted coveralls to the laundry room.

"Daddy!" Alec races down the stairs, leaps onto Dad's back, and squeezes him tight. "Are you done with work? Wanna play with me?"

I grab a juice box from the fridge and whisper. "You guys, Ian's napping on the couch." I hold a finger in front of my lips.

Dad nods and lowers his voice. "Let's play in the backyard so your brother can rest."

"Yay!" Alec matches Dad's whisper and slides off his back. "Guess what? We watched a movie about a dinosaur today."

"What kind of dinosaur?"

"The kind that's going to chase you," Alec growls.

Dad slides the patio door open and grins at me. "If I'm not back in an hour, send help." He winks, then races outside.

I pluck the TV remote out from between the couch cushions and plop into Dad's recliner. Before I thumb the power button, I look over at Ian on the couch. His back rises and falls steadily, and the tiniest snore rustles across the room.

Dude is worn out. Can't say that I blame him. The last day of school is exhausting.

But school is done. And until Elite camp starts on Sunday, all I have to do is relax.

I pull the rickety recliner handle all the way back to extend the footrest and feel my body sink even further into the soft leather. My size fourteens dangle off the end. I rotate my ankles in circles, stretch my arms over my head, and exhale.

"Is your Dad home?" Mom kicks her shoes off and sets her laptop bag on the kitchen counter.

I hold a finger over my lips and point to Ian snoozing on the couch. "Yeah, he's out back with Alec."

She nods her understanding, pulls a half-empty bottle

of soda out of her gigantic purse, and guzzles it down like she's home after a month in the desert. "Happy summer break," Mom whispers.

She steps delicately toward the couch and rests the back of her hand on Ian's cheek, then smooths his sweaty hair aside and touches his forehead. "Hmmpf." Mom stares at him for a long moment, then reaches down and scratches behind Wrangler's ears.

"Did your Dad see him?" Her voice is pillowy soft. "What did he say?"

"Yeah. He took Alec outside to play so Ian could rest."

Mom nods, and she presses her lips together so tight they almost disappear into her face.

I recognize her worried expression. "He's just taking a nap, Mom, it's not like he had diarrhea on the bus or anything."

Mom gives a tight smile and nods. "I'm going to check on Sarah." She walks into the kitchen and scoops a handful of fruity snack packages from a box on the counter. "Mari too?"

"As usual."

Mom grabs another handful of snacks and pauses at the base of the stairs. "Don't slump in that recliner for too long, sweetheart. It's bad for your posture."

Sigh.

CHAPTER



My rumbling belly wakes me. A yellow sliver of light peeks from behind my bedroom curtains, and I roll onto my back and stare at the crack in my ceiling. I'm half asleep, trying to figure out whether the crack is shaped like a pirate ship's mast or a basketball hoop.

Then I hear Mom's voice.

"I've never spent a summer away from the kids, and I don't want to start now!" A slamming sound, like from the pantry door, slices through the house.

I'm awake now.

"It won't be much longer, Mel. I promise. Things are picking up." Dad's voice is thin and tight-sounding.

"I thought we said I'd work part-time for six months. Not full-time for the foreseeable future."

Not this again.

My bedroom door squeaks open. "Jonathan?" Sarah peeks inside, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm awake. Come on in, Sare." I wave her inside. She

tiptoes, slowly at first, then rushes for the foot of my bed and flops face-first, sobbing.

I need to do something, quick.

I swing my legs out from beneath the covers, Zombie Spider Apocalypse pajamas and all, and sit next to her on the side of the bed. I reach out and pat her back. “Hey, whoa! Sarah, it’s okay. You know Mom and Dad have been talking about this for a while. It’s not a big deal.”

Sarah sniffs. “Well, it sounds like a big deal. It’s different than the other times they’ve argued.”

We hear Dad’s voice again. “I’m sorry. I really am. I miss spending time with you and the kids too, you know. It’s taken me longer to smooth out some of the day-to-day stuff than I thought it would.”

“Why do you always have to be the one who handles it? Why can’t one of the other techs do it?” Mom’s voice is wobbly-sounding, uneven, like she’s been crying.

“Because I own the business.”

There’s a long stretch of quiet. I can’t tell if one of them has left the room or if they’re drinking their morning coffee or what. I guess I should be grateful that the arguing has stopped, but the stillness is almost worse. Sarah’s right. This time is different, and a knot forms in my stomach.

Sarah pushes herself up and wipes streaky tears from her face. “What if they keep arguing?”

I don’t know. But I can’t tell my little sister that. I have to be brave for her.

“Everybody argues sometimes. Even people who love

each other like Mom and Dad.” I nudge her with my elbow. “How many times do Ian and Alec argue every day, huh?”

Her eyes brighten. “You’re right.” Before I can say anything else, she reaches up and gives me a quick hug. “I feel better. Thanks.”

“Sure, no prob.”

I follow her out into the hall. She goes right toward the bathroom, and I take a left and tiptoe downstairs.

Wrangler greets me with a tail thump from beneath the kitchen table, but he’s the only one in the kitchen. From Mom and Dad’s room, I hear muffled sounds of Mom’s favorite old TV show and the high-pitched whine of their bathroom shower.

I don’t know what exactly went down this morning, but maybe it’s done. Or at least there’s a cease-fire in effect.

I open the refrigerator door and stand in the cool air for a minute, wishing I could go back to sleep and start this day over.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. There are several important encounters from Chapters one through seven that help you understand Jonathan better. Choose one and explain how this moment gives insight into Jonathan as a person and what he is going through.
2. What evidence in the story shows that Mason is an important friend to Jonathan?
3. What do Jonathan's reactions to Riley, especially her giving him her scrunchie, reveal about how he feels?
4. How does Jonathan show his care for his siblings at home? What does this reveal about his character?
5. Which situation in these chapters do you think could become a bigger problem later in the story? Explain your thinking.

CHAPTER



Mom knocks on my bedroom door, a stack of my boxer briefs in one hand.

“Did you pack enough clean underwear and socks?” She sets the pile on my dresser and peers into the open duffel bag on my bed.

“Yes.”

“Did you count the number of practices you have per day and add a couple of extra pairs just in case you get too sweaty and want to freshen up?” She squints, then starts counting on her fingers. “Chafing is a real thing, you know. Very uncomfortable.”

I don’t want to be rude to my mom, but she needs to stop talking. “*Mom*. I got it. You don’t need to worry.” I slide the duffel bag across the end of the bed out of her reach.

“I’m not worried. I’m thinking ahead, covering all the bases.”

“If you’re going to use a sports analogy, at least make it a basketball analogy.”

“I wasn’t trying to make any analogies. I was just trying to help. I wish you didn’t have to stay overnight. Some of the campers commute.”

“Mason was going to overnight camps when he was in 3rd grade. It’s not a big deal. Grandad said rush hour traffic in the city is bananas, anyway. I wouldn’t want you to have to deal with that to get to work.”

I flinch. *Oh no, is she going to get upset if I mention her work?* Her and Dad’s argument is still fresh in my mind.

But Mom’s face remains neutral. “When did you get so grown up, talking about rush hour traffic?”

Whew. That was a close one. Now that I think about it, I’m kind of excited to get away from home and stay on campus. Getting a break from the family chaos for a minute? Basketball all day every day? Yes, please. But I can’t really say that.

Mom sighs and sits on the edge of my bed. “I’m going to miss you, you know. But I’m glad we’ll be able to come see you throughout the week and watch your games.”

“I’ll miss you too, Mom.”

She leans forward and pulls a small something out of the back pocket of her jeans. “Your Dad and I got you something. For camp.”

“For real?”

“For really real. While you’re at camp, Sarah will need to watch the boys. She’ll need a phone in case of an emergency. Your dad and I are giving her yours.”

“Wait. What?” My heart drops into my toes. This isn’t a gift. Taking away my phone? Every hair on the back

of my arms stands up. Is she serious?

Mom holds out a small, shiny rectangle with a rubber case. “Hold on. Hear me out. I got a new one, so I’m giving you my old one.”

Whew. “Really? Oh wow, okay. Thanks.” I turn it over in my hands. It’s another flip phone—a little newer and with a bigger screen, which of course, is cracked.
Thanks, Mom.

“You’ll keep the same number. Sarah, Dad, and I are already programmed into your contacts.” She stands up and hugs me tight. “Get a good night’s sleep, sweetheart. See you bright and early.”

“Goodnight, Mom. Love you.”

After she leaves, I count the number of boxer-briefs in my duffel and toss in a couple of extra pairs for good measure. Just in case Mom’s right.

Did I pack my fighter jet socks? What about my newest ones, the ones with army ants?

I double-check my bag and toss those in, plus my pizza socks. Grandad would approve.

Bold socks, bold choices, right?

I open my closet and pull my backpack off the floor. As soon as I unzip it, I catch a faint smell of coconut and pineapple—Riley’s shampoo.

Should I bring her scrunchie with me? Am I nuts?

Just because I bring it with me doesn’t mean I have to wear it.

I stuff the scrunchie into my duffel and zip it quick.

It's done, and nobody has to know about it.

I switch off my lamp and climb under the covers. As soon as my eyes close, my brain lights up like Prosper Valley town square at Christmas.

I'm going to my first sleepaway camp. Not just a sleepaway camp, an invitation-only basketball camp. Out of all the players in the metro, only 160 rising seventh graders—80 guys and 80 girls—were chosen. On an actual college campus in Oklahoma City, taught by actual college basketball players. A year ago, I wouldn't have dreamed I'd get invited to do something this cool.

Then my brain shifts gears.

Worries stack higher and higher, like a giant brick wall in my mind.

Will Sarah remember to feed Wrangler and let him outside?

What if Mom and Dad fight again?

What if they fight even worse than before?

What if Alec puts a toy car wheel up his nose?

And what did Slammo mean when he said he'd see me sooner than I think?

My chest feels heavy, and my brain feels all wiry and jumbled. Eventually, I finally collapse into sleep beneath the weight of all my anxious thoughts.

CHAPTER



It's hard to tell whether the Oklahoma City skyline is drenched in smog or if Mom needs to wash the van. Could be it's a little bit of both. I rub the edge of my T-shirt against the window to get a better view of the downtown skyscrapers. Ian and Alec are playing I Spy to pass the time, and I try to tune them out as Alec spies something blue for the fifth time in a row.

Ian's apparently not having it either. "Are we there yet?"

Alec bangs on the car window and yells dramatically, "I spy no way out!!!"

The twins are getting stir crazy. We're entering the danger zone for sure.

Dad hits the breaks as the cars slow down in front of him. "Soon. Just a bit of traffic."

A bit? It's been stop and go most of the way. Construction cones line the lane to our left, forcing everyone to merge.

Mom grips the handle above her seat and exhales.

“There’s always so much construction around here. You’d think they’d get this wrapped up for all the summer traffic with kids being out of school.”

We slog along through the city, enduring a perpetual soundtrack of Alec and Ian whining. Finally, the freeway opens up and Dad gases it like a nascar driver, and the minivan groans in response. At this point, I’m just hoping we make it to camp in one piece.

Dad exits the freeway into a more residential area. There are still orange and white traffic barrels here, but that’s not all. Sprawling ahead of us is a massive college campus. Clusters of brick buildings line the one-way street we’re on, and I’m pretty sure I see some crisp green sports fields beyond them. Clean sidewalks lined with fancy streetlights run parallel to the road.

Dad comes to a stop in front of a man in a navy-blue uniform with a fluorescent orange vest and matching orange hat. Fluorescent Dude motions at Dad to roll down his window.

“Good morning,” Dad says, using the same chipper voice he does with his autoshop customers.

“Where are you headed today?” the man asks. Behind us, another driver honks.

“Oklahoma Elite Basketball Camp at GPU.” Dad raises his voice slightly, as if the cars behind us need to hear this information.

“Right on!” The man gives Dad a wide smile. “Stay on Grand Prairie Parkway about a quarter mile, then take your first left. You’ll see a guy dressed like me standing outside the athletics complex. He’ll show you where you can park.”

“Great, thank you.” Another impatient horn sounds from the growing line of cars behind us, and Dad pulls the van forward.

“Is that the same place we park when we come to watch games later this week?” Mom cranes forward toward the windshield, looking skyward toward a giant arena.

“Not sure.” Dad shrugs. “I’ll ask the next parking guy.”

“There it is!” Alec bounces in his seat. “G-P-U. What’s Guh-poo?”

Ian leans into my right arm. “Guh-poo. That’s funny, Alec.”

“Good Plains University, right?” Sarah looks over her shoulder, checking with me.

“Close. Great Plains University. The Cougars. It’s where Juwan Macdonald plays. He’s an All-American, and Terrance Jones is the head coach.” I point at a billboard across the street. “See? Mac’s the one in the front with the ball. He’s probably gonna play in the NBA. Coach Jones is behind with the clipboard.”

“They’re the Cougars? Just like Collins.” Sarah stares at the giant ad as we drive past. “Makes it easier to remember who to cheer for.”

“That is very helpful.” Dad rolls his window down as he approaches another bright-vested parking helper.

“Elite Camper?” The skinny man looks like a friendly orange glow stick.

“Yes, sir,” Dad says.

“Last name?”

“Spencer. Jonathan Spencer.” Dad sits up taller.

Glow Stick Guy makes a pencil mark on his clipboard, reaches into a large box at his feet, and pulls out a tangled jumble of baby blue lanyards. He separates one lanyard from the mess and hands it to Dad. “Park in any of the numbered spots along the first row next to the building. Wear your lanyard, bring your gear, and enter through South Gate Entrance One.”

Mom leans toward Dad’s open window. “Excuse me, sir? Is this where we park to watch the games?”

Glow Stick Guy shakes his head. “No ma’am, for the games you’ll want to park in the parking garage behind me. It’s free during Elite camp evenings.”

“Thank you.” Mom smiles sweetly at the parking attendant and readjusts herself in her seat.

Dad sighs. “I told you I’d ask.”

Mom shrugs. “Sometimes you forget things.”

“Oh-kay.” Dad cranks the window up and rolls past the raised gates into the reserved parking lot by the arena. “How amazing is this place? What do you think, Jon?” He pulls into a spot and turns the car off.

What do I think? I think this is awesome. I also think it just got real. My stomach flips like there are hippos somersaulting in my gut.

“Are we excited or what?” Dad opens the driver’s side door and hops out of the car.

“Ian, *move!*” Alec pries the van door open and climbs over Ian’s outstretched legs, kicking one of Ian’s knees in the process.

“Oww! Mo-om! Alec kicked me!” Ian’s face is beet red, and a giant tear runs down one cheek.

A whole week playing basketball away from all this family drama?

Yeah. I’m ready for it.

I drop my blue Oklahoma Elite lanyard around my neck and pull up my GPU Cougars socks. Sarah catches my eye as we wait for Ian to collect himself and exit. He moves like he’s seven on the outside but 97 on the inside. I lean toward her and whisper. “Text me if you need me, okay?”

She gives me a tight smile. “We’ll be fine.”

I remember how she cried when Mom and Dad were fighting and add, “Seriously, though.” I grab my duffel from the floor and look her square in the eyes.

“*I know*. I think we’ll survive a week.” She climbs out of the van after Ian. “But I’ll still text you.”

I grab my ball, shoulder my duffel, and head toward the sign that says, “South Gate Entrance #1.” On the side of the arena wall is a mural of the All-Americans and NBA All Stars who have come through the Great Plains University program. These are some ballers. *And I’m going to play on their court. So cool.*

While I’m staring at the larger-than-life legends, Ian slides beneath my right arm, and Alec hooks his little hand around my left elbow. That kind of thing would be sweet if we were at home, but we’re not. Here, it’s just embarrassing.

“Oooh! Boys! Turn around and face me. That’s a perfect spot for a picture!” Mom yells and waves, and everybody on the entire campus is probably looking

at us right now. She turns to Sarah. "Real quick. Go stand with your brothers."

I want to dissolve into the air right now.

Sarah stands next to Ian and flips the end of her ponytail to one shoulder.

"Ready?" Mom hoists her phone up and squints towards us, then starts giving us directions. "Alec, no silly faces. Ian, smile, please. With teeth. No. Not that many teeth."

"You call this quick?" Dad shakes his head and checks his watch, but he's grinning.

"Do you mind? I'm making family memories here." Mom holds three fingers high, ready to count down.

"Please, let's just go in, okay? You're making everyone miserable." Dad walks toward the entrance and motions at us to join him.

"Everyone is fine." Mom raises her voice so Dad can hear her. Dad and everyone else in the city.

Other families hurry past us into the arena. Do my parents have to do this right now?

"Guys, please?" Those hippos in my gut are stamped up to the top of my throat now. "Can we just do this?"

"All right, all right." Dad holds his hands up in the 'I surrender' position. "Come on, kids. Smile."

"Thank you," Mom says through gritted teeth.
"Three, two, one, cheese."

The four of us squeak out the most unimpressive

“cheese” in the history of saying cheese. Mom clicks the button. “There. Was that so bad?” She tosses her phone into her purse and sighs, then straightens up and smiles at me. “Let’s go get you registered, Jon.”

The automatic double doors slide open, and I slink inside behind Mom and Dad, flanked on either side by my brothers and sister.

Two long tables sit beneath an enormous lighted sign that reads “Welcome to Oklahoma Elite Basketball Camp.” The room is filled with families, players, and lots of official-looking people wearing Oklahoma Elite gear. All of them glance up at me when we walk into the arena lobby.

This is happening. It’s really happening.

I’m used to feeling eyes on me when I walk into a room at school. But here? This is new and cool, but it’s also strange. I don’t know these people.

A college-aged guy taps my shoulder. He’s about six inches shorter than me, wearing a blue GPU Cougars jersey with a *Hello My Name Is Zeke* sticker. He looks up and grins. “Hey, you must be Spencer. Welcome to Oklahoma Elite Basketball!”

“Hey.” How does this guy know my name?

He glances at my overstuffed duffel bag. “Glad you’re here. Boys’ overnighter registration is at the far end of the table on your right.” Zeke points me toward my destination.

“Thanks.”

I head toward the lines, trying subtly to shake the twins off my arms.

We join the line full of players with their well-behaved siblings and well-dressed parents.

“Last name?” An older man wearing a GPU warm-up jacket smiles up at me.

“Spencer. S-p-e-n-c-e-r. Jonathan.” Mom answers before I can say a word.

“Yes, Spencer, of course. From Collins Middle, correct?” Registration Man doesn’t wait for an answer. He pushes his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose and types my name into a form field on his tablet. He nods, passes the tablet to Mom, who begins reading and clicking things like I’m not even here.

“Are those for us?” Alec points at the merch basket.

“Yes, they are,” Registration Man says. “You and your siblings may help yourselves.”

“You can pick one thing,” Dad says. “Leave something for the other kids.” Alec grabs the basket and plunges both hands into it. Ian watches, humming a game show theme song and swaying back and forth.

I turn to Dad. “You guys can go, if you want. It’s a long drive back.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mom says. “We want to make sure you get settled in okay.”

Registration Man plunks a stack of jerseys and a thick, plastic card on the table in front of me. “Here’s your practice jersey, your game jersey, and your dorm key-card. You’ll put this in your lanyard and keep it with you. Let me see if your roommate has checked in.”

“My roommate?” Nobody told me anything about a roommate.

“Ah! Yes, here he is. The other Collins player, Trey Matthews. He’s already checked in.”

My whole body freezes, like my blood instantly turned to ice.

Slammo’s here?

“Oh, I didn’t know there was another Collins boy here, how wonderful.” Mom clasps her hands together.

Wonderful? More like a complete and utter nightmare.

My pulse throbs at the base of my throat, and my shoulders cinch higher until they’re practically touching my ears.

Coach sent Slammo?

Slammo. Really?

Why did Coach Robinson think putting the two of us in the same camp was a good idea?

Does he not remember anything that guy put me and Mason through last year?

Slammo might be a good player, but he’s a jerk.

Shouldn’t this camp have a no jerks allowed policy?

A stabbing feeling pierces my gut. How could Coach Robinson betray me like this?

I don’t care what Mom said. This is *not* wonderful.

This is the opposite of wonderful.

This is a horrible, catastrophic mistake.

CHAPTER



Registration Man keeps talking, completely oblivious to the landslide happening inside my head. “Mom and Dad, here’s a copy of the camp tournament schedule and camp photo information.” He hands them a pair of brochures, then turns to me with a huge smile. “You’re all checked in. Have a wonderful week.” He motions the next family to come forward.

Sweat floods off my forehead and drops onto the concrete floor—which is an odd feeling for someone whose insides just turned into an iceberg.

“This is it.” Dad grips my shoulder. “I’m so proud of you, Jon. Go get ‘em this week!”

Dad’s words break through my panic. I manage a smile. “Thanks, Dad.” I appreciate that he’s trying to pump me up. And if it wasn’t for Dad selling the charger last year, I wouldn’t even be able to come to camp this summer. I can’t let Slammo ruin this moment for me, or have Dad think I’m having second thoughts.

“You okay?” Dad’s eyebrows knit together.

“Yeah, just nerves, I guess.”

He pulls me in for a quick hug. "I'm sure all the other campers are feeling the same. Just remember to go out there and have fun."

Before I can reply, Mom decides it's her turn and wraps me in a big bear hug. "See you at your first game. Work hard!"

Mom bends down and musses Ian's hair. "You gonna give your big brother a hug?"

"Can we go home now, Mommy?" Ian leans against her leg. "Bye, Jon. I love you."

Alec grabs my hand and pretends to sob. "This is goodbye, my brother! We have to leave you noooow!" He throws his head back and wails, and families near us giggle.

Mom gives me a sheepish smile. "We'd better get going. Have fun, sweetheart. Love you." She grabs Alec by the waist and hoists him up onto her hip.

"Bye, y'all. See you."

"What will we do without you, Jon? Whaaat will we dooooo?" Alec flings his arms above his head. "Nooo! Remember me, Jonathan Spencer! Remember me!"

The arena lobby goes silent except for Alec's pretend hysteria and the hissing noise of my mom shushing him.

All eyes are on my family, and it feels like they're walking in the slowest slow motion possible. Finally, they step through the double doors and out into the parking lot.

Then, all eyes are on me, standing alone near the registration table. Once again, not only am I the tallest

guy in the room, but I'm the tallest guy in the room with the loudest family on the face of the planet. And, once again, people stare at me like I belong in the zoo.

I do my best to be as normal as possible and casually scan the room, looking for an escape route.

Up a short flight of steps, there's a trophy case and a "Registered? Wait Here" sign. Next to it, at least a dozen guys about my age are standing in a half circle, some talking, some dribbling, some staring at their phones. Slammo is nowhere in sight.

I do a double-take because in the middle of the group of guys, there's one who looks like he's at least my height, maybe even taller. My insides do a tiny jump for joy.

I know I shouldn't stare—I know it—but I can't help it. I've never seen another kid my age who was as tall as me. It's amazing and unreal. Then, it hits me...*Oh, this must be how people feel when they see me.* Seeing this guy towering above the crowd, I realize how impossible it is *not* to look at someone like that.

But not only is he tall, he's also built. He's not string-bean skinny like me. Not by a long shot. Even his shoulders have muscles, and he's wearing a Skyline Wolves Basketball T-shirt.

Where is Skyline? I swear I've heard of that school before.

The guy standing next to the human wall is also wearing a gray Skyline Wolves T-shirt. He's about a foot shorter than The Wall, has tight curly hair, and the biggest mouth on a human being I've ever seen. It takes up most of his face, and it's not even open. But then the guy with the huge mouth says something to The Wall and points directly at me. And yes, his open

mouth is even more gigantic.

For a split second, I act like I'm looking at the trophy case behind them. I'm busted, so I might as well say something to them.

I adjust my duffel bag on my shoulder, stuff my basketball under one arm, and walk up the steps to the "Wait Here" sign.

The first step goes exactly like you'd expect.

So does the second step.

That third step, though.

The basketball under my arm threatens to pop loose, so I reach to tuck it tighter with my free hand.

But when I do that, I shift my shoulder. It's not a huge shift, but it's enough to slide my duffel bag strap down to my elbow.

The duffel bag's weight pulls me off balance, and I stumble.

The stumble snowballs into a full-on, face-first fall.

Right at The Wall's feet.

Everybody gasps at once.

Well, everybody except The Wall.

I scramble to my feet, pull up my Cougar socks, and collect my stuff in two seconds flat. Now I'm standing face-to-face with a kid who's actually at my eye-level.

That never happens. "Uh, hey," I say.

One corner of his mouth turns up in a grin, and he

lets out a tiny laugh. Just one. Then he stares down at me, his eyes blank, his expression as unreadable as a rock.

“The end of the line’s that way.” The guy with the huge mouth points to his right and rolls his eyes.
“Dork.”

“Thanks.”

A taller dude, maybe 5’10” if he’s lucky, steps in front of me. I can’t help but notice his arm is as big around as The Mouth’s neck. He’s wearing a gold chain over his Skyline T-shirt and sporting a mustache that’s bushier than both my eyebrows combined. It’s the most impressive yet terrifying mustache I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen a middle-schooler with a mustache before.

Today’s just full of firsts.

“Man, check out this guy.” The Mustache takes a step toward me and puts a hand on The Mouth’s shoulder. I hold my chest high, but I back up. “He thinks we told him he could leave. I can’t believe he did that.”

The Mouth laughs. “I told you where the end of the line was, dork. I didn’t say you could go there yet.”

I look over at The Wall. He stares silently back at me.

“Right,” I say. “That way?” I step in the direction of the line, but they step in front of me.

“Nice socks.” The Mouth points at my baby blue footwear. “I bet you’re from Edmond or Owasso or something. One of those suburb kids who think they special.”

What in the world?

My heart pounds in my throat. I thought my first day at CMS was rough. This is a thousand times worse. *What's with these guys? Why do they care where I'm from?*

"Um, no. I'm not. But, um, thank you." I quickly turn and step around the Skyline Wolves and hustle my way to the back of the line.

I face the trophy case and pretend to study the shelves full of pictures and awards. This is definitely *not* Little Cougars. At Little Cougars, only the adults had facial hair and muscles. And nobody at Little Cougars tried to physically intimidate me. Also at Little Cougars, I had at least one friend. Mason was there.

"Classic Baby Socks."

I know that voice. I turn around, and there's Slammo staring at me from the middle of a group of guys. His grin dissolves into a smirk, and he smacks his palm against the ball in his hands. He turns away from me and starts laughing and chatting with the others.

He's not supposed to be here. He's definitely not supposed to be here, and already getting along with people and making friends.

My heart pounds faster, and my legs feel itchy from the inside. I feel like I've dropped from the sky onto an alien planet.

In my head, I hear my mom's voice. *Stand up straight, Jon.* I pull my shoulders back, hold my chest high, and face the front of the line.

"Okay, Elite Oklahoma Guys, time for you to see where you'll be living and working for the next week," a stocky man with a bullhorn calls.

The line starts moving, and I move with it. I need

to focus on listening to Tour Guide Guy and getting ready for camp, but all the what-if questions come at me like a swarm of mosquitoes.

What if coming to camp was a huge mistake?

“We’re standing in Cougar Arena,” Tour Guide Guy says. “Home court of the GPU Cougars. You probably recognize it. All our morning camp-wide meetings with Coach Jones are here. Your tournament championship game at the end of the week is here, too.”

Cool. But what if it’s Slammo versus me in the finals and I lose?

Tour Guide Guy walks us outside into the blazing June sunshine. “Over there, across the

quad, is the James Gym. That’s the boys’ practice gym, also where your nightly games take place.”

Check. What happens if Slammo fills my dorm with pudding? What if those Skyline Wolves help him?

We walk past the gym to the outdoor courts and a series of bulletin boards. “Pay attention to the bulletin boards for contests and activities. We’ll post things here, on the digital signs at your dorms, and on the Oklahoma Elite app if you have that.”

I definitely don’t have the app. What if I’m the only player who doesn’t have the app?

Who am I going to do activities with, anyway? My best friend’s on the other side of the state.

Tour Guide Guy walks us to a U-shaped building and stops on the sidewalk. “This is the player’s residential complex. Boys’ dorms are in the tower to my left. In the middle is the cafeteria. Swipe your card when you enter, and it’s all-you-can-eat. Also, gents, it’s a

bus-your-own-table cafeteria, so clean up after yourselves.” The guide points to the flat section in the center of the U-shape. “Go straight through the cafeteria, and you’ll see the student lounge. In there, you’ll find pool tables, ping-pong, and air hockey.” He points to the tower on his right. “And that other tower is the girls’ dormitory.”

He talks so long that I lose myself in my own thoughts.

How in the world did Slammo convince Coach that he should come to this camp?

These Skyline guys—the huge ones with the muscles and the attitudes to match—they’re next-level intimidating.

What did I get myself into?

At least at Little Cougars, I had Mason on my side.

Here?

I’m on my own.

CHAPTER



Next thing I know, Tour Guide Guy walks us to center court at Cougar Arena. It's almost as big as the arena where the Thunder play, but not quite. It's definitely way nicer than the CMS gym.

In the middle of the basketball court, there's a stage with a row of folding chairs and a microphone stand on it, kind of like the one we use at CMS for assemblies. This stage is adult-sized, not middle-schooler sized.

In front of the stage, there are folding chairs set up in two sections marked A and B. Both are full of campers except for the last two rows of section A.

"Boys, drop your gear at the end of the ramp. Fill in the empty seats in Section A, please, and have fun," Tour Guide Guy says. I stash my ball in my duffel bag, add it to the gear pile, follow the line, and take a seat next to a kid wearing an Argyle Eagles T-shirt.

A metallic clunk echoes, and the arena goes pitch black. Then the room explodes with

thumping bass. The whole arena feels like it's been

zapped with electricity. The stage lights brighten, and the GPU teams bound across the stage, jumping around and waving their arms.

Across the aisle, all the girls in Section B hit their feet, screaming and cheering. The guys

around me stand up too, whooping, cheering, and clapping along to the beat of the music.

I've been to pep rallies before, but I've never seen anything like this. Little Cougars didn't have a soundtrack.

The beat drops, and a blazing circle of light hits the sideline—*ka-boosh*—and there's GPU Head Coach Terrence Jones, in his trademark baby blue suit and fedora. He's even more intimidating from the bleachers than he is on TV. He's gotta be at least sixty years old, but he looks like he can run laps around his college starters. The dude's a legend.

Coach Jones jogs to the stage, pumping one fist in the air as he bounds up the steps two at a time. He motions to the sidelines, and a whole bunch of people hustle onto the stage behind him.

The music quiets, then it cuts out completely, and Coach Jones steps to the mic. We sit, and the arena is so quiet we can hear the leather of Coach's shoes against the platform as he lifts the mic from its stand and paces across the stage.

"It's so good to be back at Oklahoma Elite. I've watched some familiar faces come through the arena doors today. I'm excited to see our big guy here. Where's DJ? Stand up, DJ."

A bunch of the guys whoop and holler, and I scan the

crowd looking for this DJ kid. I don't need to look far, though. A few seats away from me, in my row, The Wall stands with his arms crossed, showcasing his crazy huge muscles. The dude looks like a real-life action hero. When he sits, The Mouth and The Mustache clap him on the back and pump their fists into the air.

"I've seen some fresh faces today, too. We're bringing a lot of new talent into Oklahoma Elite this year. A lot of talent. We've got another big guy this year I want to shout out. He's going to be playing for my good friend Coach Robinson over at Collins—Jonathan Spencer. Jon, where are you?"

Me? Why is Coach Jones calling me out?

"Stand up, Spencer."

I rise on wobbly knees and stretch up to my full height, knowing all too well that I look nothing like the superhero-shaped dude whose name was called before mine. A few people clap politely. As I drop back into my seat, I notice Coach Robinson is applauding me.

My face is still hot when Coach Jones continues speaking.

"I've heard great things about you, Spencer, and I can't wait to see what you're capable of."

Did I fall asleep on the tour? Am I dreaming this? None of this feels real.

Coach Robinson spoke with Coach Jones about me?

"Every single one of you is here because your coaches saw something in the way you play that sets you apart from your peers.

“What I want you to know is that your talent may have brought you this far, but from here on out, the future of your game will depend not just on your talent, but on your determination. Your work ethic. Your coachability. Your attitude. In other words, your future in basketball is in *your* hands.”

Coach Jones pauses and looks out at the crowd. “What are you going to do with it?”

His question lingers in the air, settling over us.

“This week, you will meet new friends, you will make new memories, and you’ll work with Oklahoma Elite coaches who will push you to your limits. These experiences will help you answer that question for yourself. If you’re lucky, you might even have a little bit of fun.

“This afternoon, when you get to your dorm, you’ll see a card with your name and a number. Put that number on your practice jersey when you show up for tryouts this evening.”

The room spins.

Tryouts? Coach Robinson didn’t say anything about tryouts.

“Tryouts?” I say out loud before my brain can stop me.

“Shhh.” The kid from Argyle elbows me.

“I know it’s been a long day of travel for some of you, but show up and do your best this evening. Tomorrow morning, after breakfast, your name and team will be posted on the practice gym door.”

I know Coach Jones is giving us vital information, but the word “tryouts” is bouncing between my ears like

a loose ball. I thought we were all hand-picked to be here.

What are we trying out for?

One by one, Coach Jones introduces the coaching staff. Everybody cheers when the GPU Cougars star Juwan Macdonald stands up and waves to the crowd. When Coach Robinson's name is called, I clap extra loud even though he's coaching one of the girls' teams.

After coach introductions, the welcome meeting's over. I file out behind the Argyle kid and dig through the pile of bags until I find my duffel, then follow the crowd outside.

Across the quad, the guys and girls move in separate groups toward the dorms. Up ahead, I recognize The Wall and his pack of wolves, Mouth and Stache. Walking with them, though, are two girls. One has a long ponytail the color of maple syrup, and the other has cropped blonde hair.

"Why's Coach Jones care about some skinny beanpole kid, anyway?" Mouth's voice carries across the quad.

"Dude trips over his own feet." Stache stage dives onto the grass and lies on his back, laughing.

"I bet Coach Jones is friends with his parents or something." Mouth helps Stache to his feet. "No way this Spencer kid can hoop with us. Right, DJ?"

Without a word, The Wall opens the door to the McMurtry building, the entrance to the student lounge and the dorms. He holds the door for the girls and the rest of the Wolf Pack. After his crew is inside, he stands there, looking out over the crowd. He looks right at me. And for a second, I think he nods, like

Hey, I see you. Come on, I'll hold the door.

Is he really holding the door for me? Does he want to be friends? Maybe we just got off on the wrong foot, like Dad says sometimes. Maybe he wants to apologize for his scary crew.

Before I can think twice about it, I raise my right hand and wave. Not a small wave, but the kind that resembles one of those dancing inflatable noodle thingies at used car dealerships. I kick my legs into gear and sprint toward the McMurtry lobby door.

The Wall steps inside the building, still holding the door open with one hand.

I skid to a stop on the pavement in front of him and accidentally drop my duffel at his feet. The zipper busts open, and a few items spill out over his shoes.

By a few items, I mean my oldest pair of underpants and two of the brightest colored socks I own.

I grab my briefs—the ones that are slightly too small, the elastic waistband is frayed, and there's a hole in the seat—scoop up the neon socks with swordfish print and the bright orange pair with a yellow sunshine pattern, and stuff everything back into place.

As I straighten up, The Wall's hand extends toward me. In it is Riley's scrunchie. *You've got to be kidding me. Of all the things to fall out of my bag.* My ears burn as I snatch the scrunchie and force it deep, deep into my duffel.

"Thanks." My voice is too high. I zip the duffel closed and lean against the doorframe as casually as possible. "You saw nothing."

From across the McMurtry lobby, the rest of the Wolf Pack howls with laughter.

The girl with the shiny, maple syrup colored hair speaks up. “Come on, y’all. Like that couldn’t happen to any of you.” She’s really pretty.

Mouth snorts. “Come on, DJ. Game three’s gonna be on soon.”

The Wall lingers for a moment, staring at me. Then, without a word, he walks away, joining the rest of the Wolf Pack to watch the NBA Finals in the student lounge.

I catch the door before it squashes my hand and step into the lounge.

The maple syrup hair girl and her friend walk over to me. “Hey, ignore them. I’m Sammie Lopez. This is my friend Izzy McGee.”

“Jonathan Spencer.” I say.

“Is this your first year here at Oklahoma Elite too?” she asks.

“Yeah. I just moved to the city last year from Prosper Valley.”

“No way! That’s like me. I moved here from Wayne last year, too. So you’re a country boy, huh?” She pretends to tug on imaginary suspenders.

Wayne’s even smaller than Prosper Valley. “Ha. Born and raised, ma’am.” I exaggerate a thick, Oklahoma accent.

“It was nice to meet you, Jonathan,” Sammie says. Izzy tugs on her arm.

“Sorry—we need to get ready for tryouts. It was great meeting you, Country Boy. See you around?”

“Yeah, you too. See ya.”

So that happened. I think I just met the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen. She’s a different kind of pretty than Riley. Riley’s tiny and bright—from her red hair to the sparsely cheer outfits and colored bows she wears every day. But Sammie’s tall, tan, and looks like she could hold her own out on the court—she’s a baller. I’ve never met any girl like that before.

Across the room, on the left side of the far wall, a giant LED sign flashes next to the West stairwell: “What’s Happening in West Tower, Oklahoma Elite?”

I have the same question.

Mom’s voice echoes in my head again: *Stand up straight, sweetheart.*

I pull myself up taller and check my lanyard. My blue keycard reads West 207.

I take the stairs to the second floor, crossing my fingers that Slammo hasn’t already gotten to the room and poured pudding in my closet. Every door is decorated with two cougar stickers, each with the name of a camper printed on them in bold blue letters.

My name’s stuck on the outside of Room 207, along with my roommate’s, just like Registration Man said: Trey Matthews and Jonathan Spencer.

I hold the keycard in my palm for a long second.

What if I asked for a different roommate? What if Slammo doesn’t want to room with me, either?

The phone in my pocket buzzes.

Sarah

Hey Jon. Hope camp is good so far. You missed a big fight on the way home. Mom asked Dad if he would hire her to work in his shop. Dad said no. Mom went to her room and hasn't come out. What do I do?

My chest tightens. *Another fight? Already?* Why can't Mom and Dad just talk it out like normal people? What do I tell Sarah? She's the one who has to be strong now, especially for Alec and Ian.

I look around the hallway. It's empty, so I take a minute to think and text her back.

Jonathan

Hey Sare. Remember what Mom and Dad tell us when we fight? Give each other space. Mom needs space. Maybe hang with the boys til she cools off? It's OK

I hear voices at the end of the hall, so I take a deep breath, open the door, and switch on the overhead light.

Nothing happens.

Nobody's here.

The only things in the room are a long desk and two extra-long twin beds. No sign of Slammo yet.

On one of the nightstands, there's a note with my

name on it.

Welcome, Jonathan!

Tryouts start at 5:30 p.m.

Pin the number on the attached cards to the front and back of your practice jersey, then please report to Practice Court One no later than 5:15 p.m.

Don't forget to bring water.

Signed,

Oklahoma Elite Coaching Staff

I stare at the card until the words blur together.

So it's true. There are, in fact, tryouts.

I pull my practice jersey out of my duffel and fasten the number cards to it like the note says. Should I unpack now or wait to make sure I actually survive the tryouts? If I don't do well in tryouts, will they cut me and send me home? Would they really do that?

Focus, Jon.

I slide out of my T-shirt and into my now-numbered practice jersey. The card pokes me in the shoulder blade, but I tug the jersey until nothing sticks or jabs. Then I jam my T-shirt back into the duffel, sling it over my shoulder, and peek into the hallway. No sign of Slammo.

I'm not taking any chances.

CHAPTER

102

A black and white illustration of a whistle with a ring, positioned over the number 102. The whistle is angled downwards and to the right, with its ring at the top right. The number 102 is rendered in a bold, blocky font.

The James Practice Gym could probably fit six Collins Middle School gyms inside, it's that huge. It's not quite 5:15 yet, but a lot of guys are already on the courts, shooting and playing a little 3-on-3 to warm up. I walk across the floor, searching for Practice Court One, listening to the sounds of their shoes and basketballs echo. It sounds like they're playing at the bottom of a canyon.

Am I supposed to check in with a coach or something? On the other side of the gym, I spot eight older guys, each of them holding tablets and wearing black Oklahoma Elite Staff visors. Maybe I need to talk with one of them? But which one? None of the other players is talking with the coaching staff. I don't want the coaches to think I don't know what I'm doing. But I don't know what to do. The butterflies in my stomach morph into rhinos.

At Little Cougars, we were separated into teams by our grade. Coach Robinson and Coach Watson led the clinics, JV and Varsity teams from the high school worked with us in drills, and at the end, each grade played its own tournament. This last year was my first

time through the program, and even I could pick it up quickly. Everything was clear.

Nothing about how Oklahoma Elite works is clear.

Am I the only one who's a little confused? How do all these other guys know what to do?

A sharp shove jars my shoulder forward, and I nearly tumble into Court One's sideline bench.

The Wall lumbers past, head high, chest out.

"Watch yourself, Beanpole," Mouth says over his shoulder.

Stache laughs. "Wouldn't want you to trip again."

A buzzer sounds, followed by the crackle of static, then Coach Jones's gravelly voice fills the gym. I look around, trying to find him.

"Listen up! You're divided into tryout teams based on your jersey numbers. When you hear my whistle, hustle to the court that has your number. Games will be five minutes with a running clock. When the final buzzer sounds, if your jersey number starts with an odd number, you'll rotate clockwise to the next court to play against another group."

I'm number 35. I'll be rotating.

"We're not looking for superstars. We're looking for attitude and effort—a phrase you're going to hear a lot of this week. Play hard, be a good teammate. We're not calling fouls unless somebody's bleeding or broken."

Wait. What? Does bleeding or broken mean bleeding or broken?

“Show us what you’re made of. After tryouts, you’ll go to dinner, and while y’all are eating, camp coaches will be having a draft. We’ll announce teams after breakfast tomorrow. Good luck.”

REET!

Beneath the far basket, four other guys have jersey numbers in the thirties. I hustle toward them, catching a glimpse of the guys wearing forties at the opposite end. Slammo is number 41.

Coach Alverado—at least, I think it’s Coach Alverado—steps forward to the middle of the court with a ball. All the guys, the thirties and the forties, rush to center court and huddle around him.

I scan the faces of the other guys on my team, and a heavy dread settles in my gut.

“All right, guys. You heard the Big Man. Show us what you got. Thirties, you’ll start with the ball. Sideline out of bounds. Start on my whistle.”

That’s it? That’s all the instructions? I don’t know any of my teammates. Who do I guard? What position am I?

Where’s Coach Robinson when I need him?

“Good luck, Baby Socks,” Slammo says in a tone that I’ve never heard.

REET!

Across the gym, seven other silver whistles shriek, and eight coaches shout “GO!”

Oklahoma Elite Camp tryouts have begun.

By the time the sixth and final five-minute game is over, my body aches and my head is reeling. I sit on the bleachers in the empty gym with a single question rattling inside my head on repeat.

What just happened?

These guys, they were playing at a speed I've never seen before. They were trash-talking like it was their job. And the physical stuff—the elbows to the gut, the shoulders—that was more like hand-to-hand combat than it was basketball.

But Slammo played like it was another normal day in Coach Robinson's class. He even tossed out a "just breathe, roomie," when I lost my balance for the hundredth time. How come the noise and the speed and the gut punches didn't affect him? Why could he shoot bucket after bucket, and I barely managed six points and one three the whole night?

I couldn't even catch a pass. I never have trouble catching passes.

What is wrong with me?

I yank my paper number off my practice jersey and stuff it into the nearest trash bin. My stomach back-flips, and I pause, lean over the bin, and wait for my sick stomach to empty itself.

Cold sweat breaks across my forehead and the back of my neck, but the sick never comes.

I can't even puke right.

I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing the angry tears back.

The first time I heard shoes squeak across a basketball court at CMS, I felt like I was exactly where I belonged. The last day of school, that last scrimmage, felt like heaven. But these tryouts have me upside down. Tonight, I wasn't even playing the same game as these other guys.

One thing's for sure: I'm way out of my league.

CHAPTER

103



I stare at the streetlamps around the quad and watch the lights flicker on. It's dark, and I should be back in McMurtry with the other campers, but instead, my feet have brought me to the towering athletics arena. Right now, the coaches are making their decisions. I shudder to imagine what those conversations are like.

Spencer? We heard he was good, but we don't see it. Let's make him the mascot.

I need to tell Coach Robinson I let him down. That he made a mistake, and I don't belong here. I'm not even sure I should try out for CMS in the fall.

I try the double doors, and they're unlocked. The lobby is dark, but there are lights coming from a hallway and voices—lots of voices.

I follow the sounds down the hall until I find an open door. I peek in and spot Coach Robinson at a long table with the other girls' coaches.

Coach Robinson does a double-take. "Spencer?" He sits forward in his chair. "You shouldn't be in here."

Eight pairs of eyes bore into my face. I want to say something, but the words pile up in the back of my throat like uncooked spaghetti, and sweat pours out of my forehead.

“Excuse me one minute, please,” Coach says. The other coaches nod their approval.

“Let’s step out into the hallway. Whatever you need to say, you’ll need to say it here.”

In front of all these other coaches? I guess a little more humiliation is still in store for today. “I don’t know how to say this.” I twist the end of my jersey, wracking my brain for words.

Coach looks me up and down and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Tryouts didn’t go the way you’d hoped, did they?”

I swallow hard.

He vouched for me to Coach Jones, and I let him down.

That’s the worst part.

I inhale deep and stare at my shoelaces. “It’s not like Little Cougars at all.”

Coach Robinson’s expression is kind but matter-of-fact. “No, it’s not Little Cougars. The basketball world is way bigger than Little Cougars. Even a guy like you, with your natural talent, you’re going to have to work hard to compete in it. You’re going to need to toughen up a bit.”

The corners of his mouth turn up in a slight smile. “You’re going to have to work hard, and it’s not going to be easy. But I wouldn’t have invited you here if I

didn't know you could do it."

"Toughen up, like the Slammo kind of tough?"

Coach clenches his jaw and takes a long inhale, like he does when he's thinking. "Jonathan Spencer has his own kind of tough. If you dig deep enough, you'll find it." He straightens his visor. "I'm very glad you're here, and I know you're gonna do great. Just relax." He pats my shoulder, returns to the coaches' meeting, and closes the door behind him.

The sick feeling in the pit of my stomach begins to fade as I walk through the hallway.

I make my way back across the quad to the McMurtry building, listening to the crickets chirp and replaying Coach Robinson's words in my mind.

I'm not sure if I belong here, but Coach Robinson still believes in me. Maybe that's enough for now.

CHAPTER

14



I'm almost to McMurtry when I smell the unmistakable, cheesy aroma of pizza and hear the buzz of people laughing and talking.

Oh, man.

Tonight, there's a pizza party in the student lounge to celebrate tryouts being over. I don't really feel much like celebrating, but after chatting with Coach Robinson, I do feel a little better. Not pizza party better, but better.

The girls' teams are all gathered around a pair of huge round tables in one corner of the room. Paper plates, utensils, and napkins are stacked in girly baskets next to a gigantic plastic tub of salad and several bottles of dressing at one table. Pizza boxes are neatly displayed on the other.

The guys are on the opposite side of the lounge by the ping-pong, air hockey, and foosball tables. Pizza boxes, soda cans, and paper towels are littered across every possible surface.

I wasn't hungry at first, but the smell of pizza has my

stomach back in working order. I grab up a box with half a pepperoni pizza inside and sit on a barstool in the corner. The pizza needs red pepper flakes, but otherwise it's pretty decent.

From my perch in the corner, I watch the other guys socializing. Slammo is playing ping-pong with a yellow-haired kid—one of the other guys wearing forties during tryouts. Yellow Hair is laughing a lot for somebody who's obviously losing the game. The game ends, and the five or six guys who had been watching them play surround Slammo, talking and laughing.

How is it so easy for him to make friends? Do they not know who he is? Or maybe they do know, and he's recruiting more people to the Slammo club.

The Skyline Wolves sit on top of the air hockey table, surrounded by pizza boxes and soda cans. Sammie and her friend Izzy stand behind the hockey table. A few other guys crowd around, goofing, obviously trying to get Sammie's attention.

Someone's brought a portable bluetooth speaker and is blasting some music, but The Mouth's voice still carries loud and clear above the thumping bass.

"Whoever eats the most pizza in sixty seconds picks the next game. You in, DJ? Josue?" Mouth thumps his buddies on their shoulders. "How 'bout y'all?" He turns to the group of guys waiting to play air hockey. "Anybody else?" A couple of guys accept the challenge.

I gnaw on a piece of crust and watch the events unfold. This is the most normal I've seen the Wolf Pack act so far.

A thought crosses my mind, and I feel a tiny bit lighter. *Maybe they'll chill now that tryouts are done.*

Sammie walks past, pauses, and tosses her soda can in a perfect arc over the pool table, over the clusters of people talking and eating, into the corner. It lands in the exact center of the recycle bin, and everyone cheers. She looks over her shoulder at me and grins.

“Yo.” Stache waves her down. “Yo. Can we get a couple more pizza boxes over here?”

“Yo. I don’t work here. Get it yourself,” Sammie says.

“OH! Ladies’ man gets roasted!” Mouth high-fives The Wall, and a couple of other guys laugh too.

If Sammie’s response bothers Stache, he doesn’t act like it. He hops over the back of the couch, nabs a stack of pizzas from a table, and distributes them evenly among the group.

“Ready?” Mouth looks at his phone. “Set? GO!”

Eight dudes dive into their pizzas like a pack of vultures on a fallen, pepperoni sheep.

The Wall folds a whole pie in half and bites off a hearty chunk.

Stache pauses every couple of bites to untangle cheesy strings from his impressive mustache, so he’s way behind the others.

Mouth gobbles down slice after slice like it’s his only job.

Only one other guy is seriously in the game, but he’s laughing so hard he’s spraying crusty chunks across the room.

“Time!” Mouth shouts. “Count your slices. No halvsies unless we need to break a tie.”

“You didn’t say that before we started, though. You have to set the rules before, not after,” Stache whines.

“Just count. I had three.” Mouth points at Stache.
“How many?”

“Two and a half,” Stache says.

“No halvies unless we need to break a tie,” Mouth says. He points at Kevin. “How many?”

“One. I was too busy watching this guy. He had eight. I counted.” Kevin looks genuinely awestruck. The Wall shrugs.

“Anybody got more than eight?” Mouth calls.

The rest of the guys groan.

“DJ’s the winner!” Mouth fist bumps The Wall.
“What’s the next game?”

The Wall points to his soda can.

Mouth jumps up and grabs a couple of unopened soda cans. “You heard the man. Whoever drinks the most soda in thirty seconds calls the next game.” He scans the room, looking for more, and catches my eye instead. “Hey, Beanpole! How did tryouts go for you? Did your magic socks help your game?”

It feels like all the lights shut off in the lounge and a ten-million-watt spotlight just beamed right on my face.

I set my uneaten slice of pizza on top of the nearest empty box, everything in me ready to bolt for the door.

Mouth pulls a long swig off his soda and wipes his face

with the back of his hand.

Chatter in the room quiets.

From his barstool, The Wall folds his arms across his chest. All I can hear is the thump of the bass and the offbeat of my heart pounding against my collarbone.

A grinch-like grimace creeps across Mouth's face. "Did y'all see Beanpole at tryouts today? Your boy couldn't find his way to the hoop. He was like—" Mouth pastes a pathetic, sad expression on his face and whimpers like a puppy. "For real."

Heat prickles up my face and neck. I shift uncomfortably on my barstool.

"And Coach J gave you a shoutout this morning and everything." Mouth waves his hand dismissively.

I stand, ready to walk away, when a voice breaks through the crowd.

"Lay off, Cedric." Sammie leans over the counter and flings a pizza crust at him, nailing him in the back of the head. "Not cool."

"Hey! Watch the hair, Sammie." Mouth throws her a dirty look, then comes over to me, putting his arm around my shoulder. "We're all right. He knows we're just messing around, don't you, Beanpole? Hey, I tell you what, we'll give you another tryout. We'll even make it easier." He raises an unopened can of Mister Quenchy and holds it right under my nose. "Let's see how many sodas you can drink in thirty seconds. That'll be fun, huh?"

"Wait. Does he know how to drink a soda? We know he doesn't know how to play basketball." Stache, all fake concern and facial hair, asks Mouth.

“Leave him alone.” Sammie pushes forward, gently shoves Mouth aside, and grabs the Mister Quenchy from his hand.

Mouth ignores her.

So this is how it’s going to be. Great. Half the camp dunks on me, the other half feels sorry for me.

“I’m good, thanks.” I pull free of Mouth’s grasp, knocking my barstool on its side in the process. I’m done with this pizza party.

“Jon, wait!” Sammie calls, but I head for the door.
“Wait!”

“Spencer—dude—hold up!” Slammo says. He’s the last person I want to hear from right now.

Behind me, all I hear is Mouth’s high-pitched cackle. I bolt upstairs, ready to end this day and, if I’m lucky, start over tomorrow.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. There are several important moments in Chapters eight through fourteen that show Jonathan's hopes and fears about camp. Choose one and explain what it reveals about what he wants and what worries him.
2. Jonathan seems to think Slammo is handling camp much better than he is. What details lead Jonathan to see him this way, and what does this reveal about how Jonathan is feeling about his place at the camp?
3. Coach Robinson tells Jonathan that he has "his own kind of tough." What do you think he means by that, and why might it be hard for Jonathan to believe it right now?
4. Sarah reaches out to Jonathan and asks for support. What does Jonathan tell her, and what does this moment reveal about Jonathan's role in his family?
5. The Wolves stand out early in Jonathan's camp experience. What role do you think they might play later in the story, and what clues in these chapters support your prediction?

CHAPTER



I manage to walk to the stairwell, but when I get there, I kick my exhausted body into gear and take the steps two at a time.

With everybody downstairs, the second floor is completely silent, so it's just me and my thoughts as I crawl under my covers.

Coach says the basketball world is bigger than middle school. Okay, great. But what if the basketball world is full of nothing but Wolf Packs? Slammos were obnoxious and annoying, but these Skyline guys have dialed up the intimidation factor by a thousand.

My phone bleeps on the nightstand charger, so I grab it. It's a text from Sarah.

Sarah

You were right, kinda. Mom came out but she isn't really back to Mom mode. Ian slept all day so Alec and I played a million rounds of Go Fish. Hope you're having fun.

I wouldn't exactly call camp fun so far. Before I set my phone back on the charger, I pause. Mason will freak out when he finds out Slammo's not only here, but he's my roommate.

Jonathan

Tryouts sucked

Slammo's here

I plug in my phone, switch off the light, and pull the covers over my head. Then I hear a whirring and clicking, and the door creaks open long and loud.

"Jon? You awake?" Slammo whispers.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

"The guys across the hall are playing that Spider video game, you want to join before lights out?"

Please, please, please think I'm asleep and leave me alone.

"Suit yourself." The door clicks closed. A mini-wave of relief washes over me as I hear his footsteps fade down the hall. I don't want to be called Beanpole or Baby Socks or find out that I'm even more terrible at Zombie Spider Apocalypse than I am at basketball.

I close my eyes and let sleep bury this awful day.

CHAPTER



“Hey.”

I can't tell if Slammo's voice is real or if I'm having a nightmare. I open one eye and blink back the glaring overhead light, then I see Slammo standing in the doorway.

It's both.

“You going to morning meeting?” Slammo grabs his lanyard and pauses.

What? I flip onto my side and look at my watch. I overslept.

I bolt upright. In a single move, I yank my duffel out from under my bunk and rip it open.

“Uh, whose scrunchie is that?” Slammo's hanging on the doorframe with one hand and leaning into the room, gawking at my open duffel. “No way! Is that Riley's?”

No. No, no, no. I'm not doing this.

I pull my T-shirt on, zip up my duffel, and grab my

stuff.

Slammo follows me into the hallway. “So, are y’all a thing now?”

“Man, just leave it alone, okay?” I say as politely-yet-firmly as I can.

“Fine.”

Why is he walking with me? What is he doing? My stomach growls a fierce warning: *Do not skip breakfast.* I glance at my watch again, now with fully awake eyes. There’s time for a quick stop at the cafeteria.

Thankfully, as we walk into the cafeteria, Slammo sees his new buddies from Norman. I take the opportunity to slip away. The buttery, vanilla aroma of waffles wafts into my nostrils, followed by the savory scent of bacon. Or is that sausage?

I grab a plate, pile on some chicken-apple sausage links, and I’m ready to head out, but then WHAM. It’s like a ray of sunshine breaks through the ceiling and shines on the most spectacular drink machine I’ve ever seen in my life.

This drink machine has six taps containing six different types of milk. Two percent, almond (which really isn’t milk, in my opinion), vanilla, strawberry, banana, and the king of all milks, chocolate. This morning is looking better and better.

I grab two extra-large tumblers from the dispenser. In one, I pour myself a vanilla-strawberry blend, then fill the other with chocolate. Gotta get that protein to start the day.

The cafeteria is full of campers. I scan the room, looking for the Wolf Pack. They’re in the far corner by

the windows, so I grab a seat at the closest empty table behind a group of guys. Better safe than sorry.

While I drown my tryout performance sorrows in all the flavored dairy I can drink, I listen to the conversations around me.

“When do we get our team assignments?”

“Somebody said they’ll be posted on the gym doors.”

“Which coach do you want?”

“Juwan. No question. How ‘bout you?”

“They’re all good. But yeah. Juwan’s the man.”

I may have a lot to learn about the world of basketball, but there’s one thing I’m certain of: there’s no way I’m going to be on Juwan MacDonald’s team. After the way I played yesterday, I’ll be lucky to still be here by the end of the day today. But maybe, like Coach Robinson said, I’ll be tougher by the end of camp.

I down my chocolate milk in three gulps, then head for the arena behind a crowd of girl campers. By the time I get halfway across the quad, though, my gut feels like I swallowed a beach ball. A huge beach ball with—ouch—spikes.

I drank way too much milk. And I drank it way too fast.

Oh, no.

Every step sends a painful belly twinge. Coach Jones’s morning talk starts in three minutes. Even if I could run for the bathroom, there’s no guarantee I’d make it back in time. I grit my teeth and pick up the pace toward the arena entrance, where a crowd of campers

has gathered.

Two sheets of paper are taped to each door—one sheet with ten teams of eight boys, a second sheet for the girls. I squint at the boys' list.

A heinous rumble sounds from my bowels. My stomach wrings itself into a tight knot. I double over until the cramp dissolves and I can breathe again.

I stand almost upright and scan the list of teams. I'm not on the Raptors, or the Emperors, or the Flash, the Klaws, the Sooners, Cowboys, or the Mustangs. Beads of sweat erupt on my forehead. *Am I on here at all?*

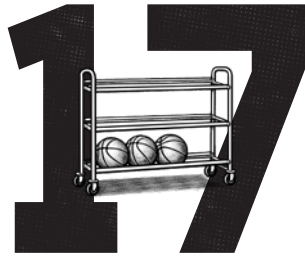
There! I spot my name in the list for the Mambas. Relief temporarily eases my stomach. *I made it.* Then I see the name right below mine, and the nausea returns. I'm on the same team as Slammo.

My gut flips over and sends a cascade of gurgling deep into my intestines. I rest my hands on my knees and take shallow breaths, waiting for the pain to subside. Then I hear, "Hey, grab your best socks, roomie! We're on the same team."

I can barely move, much less respond to Slammo.

The guys around me make their way into another set of doors, and with tiny, measured steps, I follow the crowd of campers into the arena and sit in the first empty seat I find.

CHAPTER



Somehow, I manage to keep myself together long enough to hear two things in Coach Jones's morning talk.

The first thing is that there's a three-point contest, and the girls champ and boys champ will compete at the end of the week for the camp champion.

The second is dismissal, which comes with Coach Jones's instructions: "If you play with great attitude and effort, you'll improve every time you touch the ball. Now, hustle to your practices."

Under the current circumstances, I don't know if hustle is going to happen without a side quest to the men's room.

Every muscle in the lower half of my body is squeezed tighter than tight. I carefully, slowly make my way out of the arena and into the quad. I can practically feel the other campers' judgmental stares as they run past me on their way to the practice gym.

Yes, I know Coach J said to hustle. For everyone's good, it's best that I don't.

By the time I get to the gym doors, I realize that I don't know which practice court I'm supposed to be on, and my belly is twisted up so bad that I'm not even sure I care. I just want relief.

I don't spot any familiar faces inside, and even the familiar sound of squeaking sneakers doesn't ease my stomach pain or nerves.

"Where's my Mambas?" A voice like lightning zaps across the gym.

Is that who I think it is? From here, it looks like Juwan Macdonald.

"If you ain't early, fellas, you late! Hustle in!" Coach Macdonald's voice has an electric energy that I can't help but want to rise to meet. I gulp air into my lungs, squeeze my abs, and force myself to move faster.

When I get to our court, I realize I'm the last one to arrive.

"Get close and take a knee, fellas." Coach squats and motions to us to join him.

We form a tight circle around Coach, and everybody kneels on one knee. I have no choice.

Please, please, please let the gym be noisy enough to hide anything embarrassing.

I kneel too, hoping the action in my midsection doesn't do what I think it will do.

At that moment, every other team quiets down and starts their huddle too.

The trapped dairy air blasts like a trumpet across the entire gym, and then a shroud of murk settles over

our huddle.

“Ugh, dude, Spencer, what did you eat?” On the other side of the circle, Slammo yanks his T-shirt over his nose.

A couple of guys laugh, then one of them hollers, “Gross, I laughed, and now it’s in my mouth.”

“Hey.” Coach Juwan speaks sharply. “We have business to take care of, so I’m gonna need you to focus up.” Coach shoots me a look I can’t quite identify.

Is it disappointment? Disgust?

“First, look around you. This week, these guys are your teammates. We are The Mambas, and by the end of this week, everyone’s going to be playing with a Mamba Mentality. We’re gonna work harder than anybody else. We’re gonna sweat more than anybody else. We’re gonna be more physical, give more effort, more respect, more teamwork, more hustle. What has Coach Jones been telling you?”

“Attitude and effort!” every guy shouts.

I shout too, without even realizing I am. This guy has so much swagger. He is electric.

“Now, since we’re a team, we’re gonna get to know each other better. Let’s go around real quick and y’all tell us your name and school. I’ll start. I’m Juwan Macdonald but you can call me Coach Mac. I’m from OKC and was a camper here at Oklahoma Elite back when I was your age as a middle schooler at Skyline. When I give you an instruction, the correct response is always ‘Yes, Coach.’ Got it?”

“Yes, Coach!” we shout.

He points to Slammo. "You start."

Slammo flashes a toothy smile and tugs at the front of his T-shirt. "Trey Matthews, from Collins."

"Wait, you're a Cougar?" Coach Mac puts on a fake surprised expression.

Slammo grins. "Yes, Coach."

"Back in the day, y'all were Skyline's biggest rivals."

In our day too. If Coach Mac is from Skyline, I wonder why he didn't pick the Wolf Pack for his team.

Coach points to the next guy, a kid with glasses and a mop of dark corkscrew curls. He moves his mouth, but there's not a lot of sound coming out.

"Louder, please. Say it with your chest," Coach interrupts.

"Um, Derrick Zito. I'm from Yukon." Derrick's voice shakes.

"Better. No time for shy around here." Coach motions to the next kid, who's as wide as he is tall.

"Hi. Wayne Sydlowski, from Okemah."

We continue around the circle, meeting Luis, Lucas, Charlie, and Antonio, until finally it's my turn.

"Jonathan Spencer. Collins."

"Another Cougar. All right, well, we'll make wolves of you before the week is over. Thanks y'all. Every morning, we'll start with drills, and like I said, I expect you to be here and warming up at least five minutes before practice so we can hit the ground running. We'll start with conditioning, then a skill."

Coach rises to his feet and stares at us. “I said, we’ll start with conditioning, then skill work.”

Oh. He’s ready to go.

I stand and squeak another bit of dairy into the atmosphere, covering it by scuffing my shoes against the court.

Derrick jumps. “Yes, Coach!”

“That’s more like it! All right. I want a line on the baseline. Each time I blow the whistle, the first player in line will take off in defensive slides to half-court. When you hit half-court, you’re gonna sprint back toward the basket. When you reach the three-point line, you’re gonna call for a pass. I’ll hit you, you finish at the rim with a layup. Put the ball in the rack next to me, and get back in line for another round. Got it?”

Maybe. I’m not sure.

“I’ll demonstrate one time. Matthews, get ready to give me a pass.”

“Yes, Coach!” Slammo says, without missing a beat.

We line up behind Coach Mac along the baseline. He gets low in a perfect defensive stance—knees crouched, feet wide apart, arms out wide. Then he explodes in a blurry burst of speed, sliding sideways toward half-court.

As soon as he hits the midline, Coach Mac instantly sprints back toward us. Everybody in the gym stops what they’re doing to watch him.

“Hit me!” Coach raises his hands to chest level. Slammo makes a chest pass to Coach Mac. Even though the pass is a little behind the All-American superstar, he

catches it smoothly, then one dribble, two steps, and lift-off! Coach Mac soars through the air like the Jordan sneaker silhouette. Then he casually lays the ball up off the backboard.

The ball goes through the net, and before I realize it, I'm clapping like a total dork.

"Don't applaud, Spencer. Let's go." Coach Mac fumbles around his neck for his whistle, finds it, and blows a quick blast. My ears flush red, and I suddenly don't know what to do with my hands.

I'm not off to the best start with Coach Mac.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Slammo shaking his head and looking at me like I just kicked a puppy.

When it's my turn, I drop into a defensive position and wait for the whistle.

REET!

And I'm off, sliding my way toward half-court.

"Faster! Faster! You've got those long legs, Spencer, use them! Make them work for you! Move, move!"

Pinprickly beads of sweat emerge from my upper lip.

I dig in, push harder with my quads, and pick up the pace.

About five slides in, a sharp pain stabs the soft tissues below my belly button, and I stumble. A sour taste floods my mouth.

Oh, please don't let me throw up. Please, please, please.

My breath comes in short, shallow gasps. Half-court is just a few slides away, if I can just keep moving.

“Pass!” I hear Derrick’s call for the ball ahead of me. Sweat pours off my brow.

I hit half-court, turn, and will my feet into a sprint. I imagine my gut is made of steel. I’m wearing shorts made of armor. I tell myself I am feeling no pain. But I am a terrible liar.

I stop cold, double over in agony.

“Spencer? Is this a joke?” Coach yells.

I can barely get the words out of my mouth. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Coach sighs. “Go.”

I hobble to the sidelines as the next guy in line starts his slide to half-court. Slammo puts a hand on my shoulder. “Hey, man. You okay?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I shrug his hand off and head to the locker room.

The last thing I want is Slammo’s—or anybody else’s—fake pity.

Tryouts were a disaster, and now I’m bailing out sick on my first drill with Coach Mac.

CHAPTER

18



By the time I'm done in the bathroom, practice is over, and everybody's gone to the cafeteria. I head back to my dorm, grab fresh, not-sweaty clothes and a towel from my duffel under the bed, and hit the showers.

A few minutes later, I turn the water off and stand in the warm steam. Voices from the sinks drift across the room like the puffy clouds of steam in the air.

"Did you see Spencer over on two this morning?" a wiry-sounding voice asks.

Every hair on the back of my neck stands up. His voice doesn't sound like one of the Wolf Pack, but I can't be sure.

"I know! You hear all this smack about how Collins is gonna be so good next year. I'm like, are you kidding me? The Matthews kid looks all right, but that Spencer? Trash. If this is the best they got. . . ."

Another, deeper but crackly voice chimes in. "Right? Their 'big man' is nothing but a big joke."

A hollow emptiness fills my ribs. Whoever these guys are, they think I'm a joke.

Whoosh. A toilet flushes and a door squeaks. Then a third voice enters the conversation.

"Y'all talking about Spencer?"

This voice, I know. It's Slammo.

What's he doing?

There's an awkward pause and the sound of water while somebody washes his hands.

"Yeah. What about it?" The crackly voice demands.

"He's super country, and I don't get the socks, but he's no joke. Neither is Collins. Y'all better watch yourselves."

Heat sprouts up my neck all the way to my ears.

What is he doing?

I can't believe Slammo is standing up for me.

The wiry voice mumbles something that sounds like "Yeah, well, whatever," and the door squeaks open and shut.

When I get back to the dorm, Slammo's sitting at the end of his bunk scrolling through his phone, looking proud of himself. He's probably texting the Slammo crew every detail of my adventures at basketball camp.

"I heard what you said to those guys."

"Yeah, well, they were just mouthing off. Don't pay any attention to them."

“Thanks for having my back. I appreciate it.” I drop my dirty gym clothes under my bed. “But I don’t need you feeling sorry for me.”

“Whoa, dude. Who said anything about feeling sorry for you?” He drops his phone behind him and leans back on his elbows.

“Why else would you stand up for me then?”

“I don’t know. Because that’s what teammates do. You’re my teammate.”

He goes back to scrolling, and I sit on the edge of my bed and watch him for a minute.

He says we’re teammates now, but he acted like an enemy the whole year in sixth grade.

What’s he up to?

I’ve seen enough of my classmates—not to mention my best friend, Mason—get burned by Slammo.

I don’t trust this.

CHAPTER

10



I put my jersey on and start making my way across campus to the gym. It feels good to move. This afternoon, the coaches put us through a bunch of shooting and dribbling drills, and I did pretty good, but I still can't get the failures of tryouts and this morning's practice out of my mind.

Waiting around in the dorm had my stomach doing backflips, but now that I'm walking towards my first official camp game, my nerves feel like they're settling a little.

My phone buzzes. It's a text from Sarah.

Dread shivers down my spine.

I bet Mom and Dad are fighting again.

Sarah

Hey! We're coming to your game tonight!
Yay! Can't wait to see u play a real game! Go
Jon Go! If ur phone had emojis I would use
them! <3

Oh no. How could I forget about the Spencer Family Cheering Squad? Of course, they're going to show up for the first game. I really hope I don't disappoint or embarrass them.

I should have texted them this morning and told them not to come, but those awful stomach cramps kept me from doing anything. I pick up my phone and quickly thumb a response.

Jonathan

It's not a big deal

Y'all don't have to drive all the way here just for the game. We'll have another one tmrw

Three dots hover on the tiny screen, then Sarah's reply appears.

Sarah

6pm, right? Dad said we'll get to talk with you after too :)

Well, Coach Robinson said he wanted me to toughen up.

What could toughen a guy up faster than faceplanting in front of his entire family?

CHAPTER



Monday Night: Game One

Mambas vs. Sooners

Coach Mac raises his eyebrows at my blue OKC socks as I jog to the sideline, but he doesn't say anything. "All right, y'all, it's six o'clock, let's get our heads straight and take the court with what?"

"Attitude and effort, Coach!" we shout.

"That's right. Some of y'all may be wondering why tryouts were chaos. Yeah?"

A few of us nod, but nobody responds.

"Yeah. There's a reason for that." Coach walks the sideline, passing each of us one by one. "There's a reason we don't coach during tryouts or call a lot of fouls. We want to see who gets rattled. Who stays cool, in control."

I had so many turnovers.

“On this team, we have good shooters and passers. We have a lot of talent. But we need to be better under pressure. That’s a major thing I noticed while I was watching y’all. We can play stronger and take better care of the ball.”

He keeps saying “we,” but it feels like he’s talking to me. Especially because he looked right at me when he said, “play stronger.”

Coach stops in the middle of the row. “In our first game, I’m looking for your strengths.” He motions for us to huddle up. “I want you to get out there and be aggressive, command the court, and focus. Toughness and control. All right?”

“Yes, Coach!”

“Hands in.” Coach puts a hand in the center of the huddle, and we pile on. “Mambas on three, ready? One, two, three—”

“Mambas!” The guys shout like they’re trying to blow the roof off the practice gym.

It’s hard to shout when I’m not so sure I should be here.

Families start to file into the first few rows of seats as I get my hands warmed up with some of Coach Robinson’s ball handling drills. Any minute now, the Spencer horde will burst in like a traveling circus. I can’t let them steal my focus.

Coach Mac walks over to talk with the refs and the Sooners’ coach at half-court as the pregame clock counts down to tip-off.

I scan the gym in time to spot Coach Robinson leading a group of eight girls toward the outdoor practice courts.

I catch Coach R's eye, and he gives me a quick nod and a grin.

Sammie is one of the players behind him. She notices Coach look over at me. She waves and smiles, and the inside of my chest fizzes like a bottle of pop that's been shaken a few too many times.

What is that?

My pregame jitters snowball into full-on nervousness.

What if I get the ball and I freeze again?

What if Coach Mac benches me in front of my family and the whole camp?

Coach Robinson said I have natural talent, but that I'll still need to work hard to compete. *What if I can't compete?*

Being tall and having decent skills means nothing without the toughness to back it up.

What if I don't have the kind of toughness I need?

The rhinos stampede in my gut like they did last night.

In spite of my dairy disaster at this morning's practice, Coach Mac sends me out onto the court for tip-off. I jog onto the court with my team, my heart thumping along with my footsteps.

"Let's go, Jon!" Grandad's voice slices through the small crowd's cheers, and the rhinos tap dance across my insides.

"Let's do this, Mambas!" Slammo claps. He and the other three starters position themselves around the

center circle.

The Sooners join us and settle into position. As the tallest guy, I'm facing off in the middle across from their tallest guy, waiting for the tip-off. He's about a head shorter than me, but he's wide, like a concrete block.

The referee enters the circle. "Okay, gentleman." He makes eye contact with each of us, then holds the ball between us. "Here we go."

He pitches the ball into the air. I move first and tap it to Slammo.

"Let's go, Mambas!" Coach Mac's electric voice fills the gym. "Be aggressive!"

In a flash, everyone's sprinting toward our basket. Slammo passes to Antonio in the corner.

I slide into an open area near the basket.

Come on, Antonio. Pass it to Charlie on the wing. Not to me. Charlie.

"Jon!"

Dangit.

Antonio lobs a nice, accurate pass to me.

I raise my hands to catch it, but the ball tips the edge of my right pinky, and suddenly it's bouncing between my hands.

I never have trouble catching. Did I forget how to play? What's wrong with me?

While I'm fumbling the ball, Concrete Block closes in, bumps me with his forearm, and rips it away from me.

“C’mon, Spencer! Get tough!” Coach Mac yells above the chaos.

Concrete Block passes the ball ahead to a teammate before turning back to taunt me.

“Yeah, Spencer! Come on!”

By the time the final buzzer ends my agony, the final score is 46-36. A Sooner victory. I think I had more turnovers than points. I want to crawl into the biggest hole I can find, but Coach calls us to huddle.

“Okay, Mambas.” Coach Mac’s intense voice has a soft center. “Losses happen. I’m not disappointed that we lost. But I am very disappointed in how we lost. Some of y’all showed a lot of fight. That’s good. Y’all got us a little closer at the end. But some of you played scared. You didn’t really compete, and you let us get pushed around.”

My chin is practically glued to my chest. I can’t look any of my teammates in the eyes.

It feels like everyone’s looking at me. I got pushed around a lot and didn’t really compete. I didn’t show any fight.

How am I elite?

“But fellas, this is important.” Coach Mac’s voice loses the softness and dials up the sizzle. “Don’t get down. Even if you feel down, do not hang your head.”

I lift my chin just enough to see Coach Mac.

“This is just the first game, right? There are more games to play. We got a ton of talent on this team. I got

a feeling that we're gonna be really good. We gotta get out of our heads, not be so anxious, and just hoop."

"We got you, Coach. Attitude and effort," Slammo and his annoying confidence chime in.

"Good man, Matthews. Being Elite is all about getting better every day. Tomorrow's gonna be a great day. All right, fellas, make sure you're drinking lots of water, and do some stretching before bed tonight. Come ready to work tomorrow morning. Hands in, Mambas on three. One, two, three—"

"Mambas!"

Almost as quickly as Coach dismisses us, the Spencer Cheering Squad swarms the bench like I've been gone for two years, not two days.

Mom squeals so loud and so high-pitched I'm worried the lights are going to explode. Before I can say anything, she wraps both arms around my middle and squeezes tight.

"Hey, Mom."

"Jon! I'm gonna be a basketballer like you when I'm at CMS. Right, Ian?" Alec dribbles a miniature GPU Cougars ball with one hand.

There's a sour lump in my throat, and my cheeks feel hot. I step over the bench, sling my scratchy GPU Cougars towel around my neck, and stretch my face into a smile, even though I've embarrassed myself in front of everyone. Again.

"My turn, Mel." Mom releases me, and Grandad pulls me into a quick, strong hug. "Your first game! I'm so glad I got to see it!"

“Hey, Grandad.”

Grandad releases one side of his hug, but pulls me closer with the other arm. I’m trapped. “Chalk this one up to nerves. At school, you’re a big fish in a little pond. Here, you’re just one of a hundred. That takes some getting used to. You’ll settle in. Once you do that, you’ll be able to see your opportunities more clearly.” He claps my shoulder enthusiastically. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Is your coach Juwan MacDonald?” Dad’s eyes are as wide as waffles.

I nod. I’ve never seen my dad starstruck over anything but a car before.

“I knew it! I bet you learn a whole bunch from him this week.”

Mom looks me up and down with narrow eyes. “You look tired, Jon. Are you sleeping, or are you staying up late playing video games with the other boys?”

I let my head drop back and stare at the arena ceiling for a second. “No video games. I promise. It’s... been a long day, Mom.”

Behind Dad, Sarah’s bouncing the mini-ball back and forth with Alec. Ian’s decided to sit on the arena floor.

“Hey, Sare, guys,” I wave at them to get their attention. “Thanks for coming.”

“Sorry you lost,” Alec slams the ball into the floor as hard as he can, sending it sailing toward Grandma Cassie.

“You’ll get them next time.” Sarah walks over and high-fives me.

I give her a quick “are-you-okay?” look.

She nods and smiles.

The Wall jogs onto the court with the rest of his Raptor teammates.

Grandad nods in his direction. “Looks like there’s another big man here, eh? Nice to see there are two of you in the metro. It’ll be fun to watch you play each other, I bet.”

I nod, but not enthusiastically.

The PA system crackles to life. “Families and guests, please take your seats for the second game of the evening, the Raptors versus the Mustangs.”

“I guess we’d better scoot.” Grandad gives me another shoulder clap. “See you tomorrow.”

“It’s good to see you, sweetheart.” Mom hugs me again. “Have fun.”

“Thanks again for being here.” I turn back to leave through the team doors and spot Concrete Block with his family. They’re hard to miss, actually, because Dad Block is sharing some loud, choice words with his son Concrete.

If he yells this loud at his son when he plays well and they win, imagine what he’d do if Concrete had lost. Or worse, if he’d made the kind of mistakes I made.

Suddenly, I feel bad for wishing I’d asked my family to skip the game. I turn around to wave goodbye one last time, but they’re already gone.

“Clear the court, please.” One of the refs calls.

“Clear the court, please.” One of the refs calls.

I watch the Raptors warm up as I walk toward the locker room. The Wall is shooting free throws one after the other—*swish, swish, swish*. His form’s a little sloppy, but he’s got a nice touch. His buddies might be—no, they are—obnoxious, but maybe The Wall and I could have a conversation, big guy to big guy. It’d be nice to have a friend at camp.

I jog over to him at the free-throw line as he finishes. “Hey. Nice shot.”

The Wall turns and stares at me.

I wait for a second, thinking maybe he’ll say something.

He blinks.

“Um, yeah. So, good luck tonight.” I take a single step backward.

Nothing.

“Okay, well.” I shift my weight back and forth between my feet. “Um, yeah.”

I turn and head out the side exit toward the dorm.

A handful of guys are shooting at the half-court on the quad. As I get closer, I realize it’s Mouth and Stache. I walk faster and keep my eyes on the sidewalk.

“Yo, Beanpole, nice first game.” Mouth fakes a pass and laughs.

Stache cackles. “A week full of Ls for Beanpole.”

I keep walking. Their laughter bounces off the concrete as I pass. My pulse accelerates.

What if the whole week is like this? What if I never get used to being a little fish in a big pond like Grandad says?

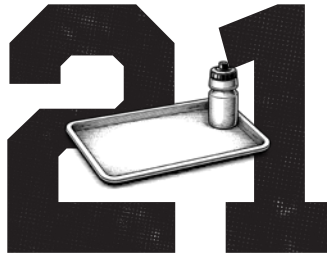
I fumble with my lanyard and open the dorm room door. I fling myself onto my bed and kick off my size fourteens, and then it hits me. Mom was right. I am tired.

The light on my Kyocera phone blinks. I roll over and pick it up with a hand that feels like it's made of lead. I've missed two texts. One from Sarah, the other from Mason.

I should read those. But my muscles ache. Even my eyelids are exhausted. Maybe just a tiny nap first.

I plug my phone into its charger on the side table. My entire six-foot-four body melts into the mattress, and I sleep.

CHAPTER



“Rise and shine, roomie. Grab your socks and get a move on.” Slammo opens the window blinds, and early morning light fills the tiny room. “Pro tip—stick to toast and juice for breakfast.” He sits on the edge of his bed and laces his broken-in shoes.

If he is ticked about losing last night, he’s not acting like it.

“You should have hung with us in the lounge last night. Antonio brought his speaker, and Luis belched a whole song in Spanish until one of the girls’ teams made us stop.”

Why is he acting like we’re friends? The guy spent most of sixth grade making fun of me. He doesn’t need to pretend I didn’t completely lose the game for us last night.

This is weird, even for Slammo.

I grab my toiletry bag and head for the bathroom without saying a word. With any luck, he’ll be gone by the time I finish brushing my teeth.

Sadly, I was wrong. Slammo's still sitting on his bed texting somebody when I get back to the room. I change clothes, slide on my pepperoni pizza socks, and lace up my shoes. When I grab my lanyard, he hops to his feet and trails me to the stairs, out the door, and into the already-blazing Oklahoma morning sunshine. We follow the stream of fellow campers toward the cafeteria.

I grab a plastic tray and stand in the Oatmeal & More line.

Slammo joins the line, too.

I skip the chocolate milk and refill my water bottle.

Slammo refills his water bottle, too.

I carry my tray toward a table in the corner, but Slammo taps my shoulder.

"Hey, wait." He points to a long table by the window where Luis, Antonio, Charlie, Wayne, Derrick, and Lucas are talking and laughing. "Let's sit with the team. They've saved us a spot."

The last people I want to face before practice starts are the ones I let down last night.

"No thanks, man." I slide an earbud in one ear. "I'm gonna listen to my playlist and get in the zone."

"Hold up a minute, will ya?" Slammo says.

I palm my earbud and face him. "Okay. What?"

"I know I wasn't always nice to you last year. I said some things and did some things that, you know, were kind of jerk moves."

My eyebrows raise, and I blink twice.

Didn't see that coming.

It's hard not to agree with what he said. "Yeah. You kinda did."

"I'm really sorry I acted like that."

Is he messing with me?

He keeps going. "I was a jerk. I promise I won't be a jerk to you anymore. We're both Cougars. We're both Mambas. We should act like teammates. Sorry I didn't figure that out before. Are we cool?"

This is a lot to take in. On one hand, it takes guts to apologize. But on the other hand, the guy tried to stuff me into a locker last year. Is there something up with him, or is he for real?

I don't know how to tell, so I just say, "Yeah, we're cool."

Slammo notices my hesitation. "Look, we don't have to be best friends. But we do have to get along if we're gonna be on the same team. Yeah?"

"Yeah, sure."

He exhales. "K. Come on, the team's waiting."

Slammo heads over to the table where the rest of the Mambas sit. I pause, not sure if I should join. I glance over at the table in the corner and sigh. I'll give Slammo this, it takes guts to own it when you're wrong.

I guess I could show a little effort—for the sake of the team, anyway.

I turn toward the Mamba table and make my way over,

sliding into an empty seat at the end.

Slammo is already talking with Luis, like he's part of his Slammo club or something. How does he do it? He's been here two days, and people treat him like they've been friends forever. No wonder he thinks he can just say, *Oh, sorry, I was a tool, I'll be nicer*, and I'll act like nothing ever happened.

Now that I think of it, even though Slammo strikes fear in everybody at Collins, his TikTok has more than 500 followers. He shoved tons of kids in lockers and put it out for the world to see, and people *still* like him. I don't get it.

I wear funny socks, and people treat me like I'm from another planet.

I pull out my phone to distract myself and finally read my messages from last night.

Mason

No way Slammo 4 real??

Man, I can't wait to tell him all about it, but right now I have no idea where to start.

Sarah

It was fun seeing you play! I didn't have posterboard to make you a sign so I used a sticky note instead for tonight. It says We <3 Jon

Ian's got a cold or something, he slept all the way home. Wrangler says hi. We miss you

It seems like Sarah is doing okay, and she really had fun at my game last night. Even though we lost. Even though I screwed up in a humiliating way. She even made me a sticky note poster. I don't know why, but I get choked up a little thinking about that.

At least my family appreciates me.

I should say something back.

Jonathan

Thanks

Does one word cover it? I should probably check in on the family drama, too, in case Sarah needs help again. So I add:

Pls keep me posted on I, A, Mom n Dad

Give Wrangler extra pets from me

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. These chapters include a very embarrassing moment for Jonathan, but they also show how discouraged he has become. Choose one moment and explain what it reveals about his state of mind.
2. Jonathan seems to expect that he will fail or be humiliated. What details in these chapters show that he is stuck in that kind of thinking?
3. Slammo continues to surprise Jonathan in this section. What does Slammo say or do that makes Jonathan unsure of how to understand him?
4. Jonathan's family continues to encourage him, even when he feels like he is letting everyone down. How do their words or actions affect him?
5. Jonathan has a rough start to camp, but some things may be beginning to change. What part of this section makes you think the story could start moving in a better direction? Explain your thinking.

CHAPTER



“Today we’re focusing on footwork.” Coach Mac has us line up side by side. “Like I said last night, we gotta get stronger with the ball.”

He holds both hands up, and Charlie passes him a ball. As the ball reaches his hands, he hops and crouches into an athletic stance. “Matthews, what position am I in?”

“Triple-threat position, Coach.”

“Good! And why do we call it that, Spencer?”

“Uh.” The question catches me off guard. What did Coach Robinson say? “It’s because you’re in position to dribble, pass, or shoot.”

“Yes! And, there’s something else I can do, too. I can pivot.”

Coach Mac lifts his right foot slightly off the ground, and with his left still planted, makes a quarter turn toward us, spinning on the grounded foot.

“A pivot can be your best friend. Especially when you’re going against aggressive defenders like we were

last night. Right now, my left foot is my pivot foot. As long as it stays on the ground, I can move my right foot. I can move it forward, I can move it backwards, even clockwise or counterclockwise.” Each time he says a possible pivoting option, Coach Mac demonstrates the move.

“A pivot can help you set up to make a move, or shoot, or pass. It can also help you get out of trouble. If a defender gets all up in your business, they’re trying to get you to panic and make mistakes. A pivot lets you adjust and take control of the situation. But the second I lift my pivot foot, it’s a travel and a turnover. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach!” We answer.

“We’re gonna get comfortable using pivots, so we’ll be ready the next time we face some aggro defense. Charlie, come here.”

Charlie does what he’s asked, and Coach Mac fist bumps him. “Okay. You’re going to guard me close. I’m gonna demonstrate how to pivot around a tough defender.”

Charlie gets into a defensive stance, and Coach nods to begin. Charlie pounces. He takes away all the space for Coach to move.

At first, it looks like Coach Mac has no options, but he doesn’t panic or retreat. He stays calm, steps backward with his right foot, and keeps his left foot planted. The ball stays safely at his chest in triple-threat.

Charlie adjusts and tries to attack again. He moves in, and Coach Mac pivots back toward him, swinging the ball under Charlie’s reaching hands. Just like that, Charlie is behind Coach Mac.

“This is how you can handle pressure,” Coach Mac says.

A few Mambas—me included—quietly say, “Whoa.”

Then Coach Mac drives to the hoop, takes two dribbles, and throws down a two-handed dunk. *That’s why he’s an NBA prospect.*

All the Mambas cheer, “WHOA!”

“Thanks, Charlie. This time, I’ll defend against you.”

Charlie squeezes his eyebrows together in a concerned expression.

I don’t blame him.

“Good luck, Charlie!” somebody yells.

“Catch and jump stop into triple-threat position,” Coach Mac says.

Charlie catches the pass from Coach, then lands on both feet, gripping the ball with both hands, elbows out wide.

“Good. Now I’m coming for the ball. What are you going to do?” Coach Mac moves into a close, low stance, swatting at the ball.

Charlie pivots away.

“Yes! Did y’all see what he did? That pivot got him out of trouble, and now he can pass to a teammate or dribble into open space. He took control and can choose where he wants to go next. Thanks, Charlie.”

Charlie joins us back on the baseline.

“All right? Everybody got it? Let’s do this! Same drill.

Pair up and take turns.”

“Wanna pair up, roomie?” Slammo spins the ball on one finger.

I’ll give him credit. He is persistent.

“Sure.”

“Great! I’ll defend first. You pivot.”

I grip the ball with the pads of my fingertips and pull it tight to my chest, jump stop, and land in triple-threat position.

Slammo squares up with me. I can’t help but think about the first time we faced off in the locker room because I called him a tool bag. So weird. It feels like that was both forever ago and just yesterday at the same time.

I shake that memory out of my head, press my right foot into the floor, and... wait. Do what now? I just watched Coach Mac and Charlie. They made it look easy. Do I turn on my heels or my toes? Should I dribble or not? My brain glitches, like a signal isn’t getting from my head to my feet.

While I glitch, Slammo grabs the ball out of my hands. “Try it again.” He tosses it back.

I catch it, step away from the pressure with my right foot, but then move my left too.

“Nope. Traveling. My turn.” He takes the ball.

I hold my arms out wide and move in on him. He sticks his elbows out wide, keeps his left foot steady, and slides his right in a half circle.

“There it is, Matthews! Excellent!” Coach Mac bounds past as he weaves around the court.

This is the pattern we get stuck in for the rest of practice.

Slammo makes it look easy.

I splutter, stumble, and fail.

What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I get this?

I’ve gotta get this, especially if we’re gonna have any chance of winning our next game.

CHAPTER

28



After morning practice, I'm starving. The cafeteria is already crowded, so I hop into the first line I see.

Somebody taps on my shoulder like they're hammering railroad spikes. "Hey. End of the line is back there." He glares and jerks a thumb backward, past the dozen or so people staring at me like I'm trying to steal their puppy or something.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to jump in front of you." My shoulders slump an apology.

Maybe I'll go to the sandwich truck instead.

I snag a foil-wrapped chicken-bacon-ranch sandwich, a banana, and a snickerdoodle and head to the beverage island for a pineapple smoothie. When I round the corner, I nearly crash into Stache, Mouth, and The Wall. My pineapple smoothie topples over.

"Beanpole! Watch where you're walking!" The Mouth shakes pineapple foam off of his shorts.

The Wall and Stache take turns mimicking my surprised expression. I slouch and walk straight toward

an empty table at the corner of the cafeteria, leaving them laughing behind me. I hope my face isn't actually as tomato-red as it feels, but if it is, it wouldn't be the first time that's happened this week.

I'm unwrapping my sandwich when Slammo plants himself in the chair across from me.

"Hey, man. We went over this yesterday. You're not eating alone. Come sit with the team."

I'd rather eat by myself than watch Slammo soak up the entire team's attention. But—and it hurts me to admit this—maybe he's got a point. If he's trying to act like a teammate, maybe I should too.

But before I can respond, Sammie and a group of girls approach our table. Two of the girls whisper among themselves. The other two, including Sammie, smile at me. Suddenly, I forget what I was going to say.

Slammo sits up taller. "Hey, ladies. Did you try the ramen?"

Sammie ignores him and looks me in the eyes. "Hey, Jon. You play at Collins for Coach Robinson, right? You're lucky, he's really cool."

I play. Collins. Coach Robinson. "Um, yeah. Yes. I play for Coach R at Collins." I choose this moment to pick a wilted piece of lettuce off my sandwich, then hide it in a napkin.

Slammo looks at me, and his jaw almost drops off. He turns in his seat to face Sammie and smiles like he wants to show her every tooth in his head. "We haven't been introduced. You know, I play for Coach Robinson too. Jon and me—we're on the same team here at camp and at Collins. We're teammates and friends.

I'm Trey."

Sammie shoots me an "oh, brother" look, then politely turns to Slammo. "Hey. I'm Samantha Lopez. Sammie. Nice to meet you." She turns back to me. "So anyway, I just wanted to wish you good luck in the three-point competition tomorrow. We'll be cheering for you."

"Thanks. And good luck to you, too. Your's is later today, right?" I feel Slammo's gaze heavy on the back of my head. I'm probably going to get an earful from him as soon as they're gone.

"Yup. Izzy and I are both competing." Sammie points to her short blonde friend, and I give her a thumbs up. "We better get going. I want to take a nap before afternoon practice starts."

"See ya." I sink my teeth into the last half of my sandwich and wash it down with a swig of smoothie.

When I turn back to Slammo, he's staring at me, slack-mouthed, and shaking his head. "I don't believe it. Samantha Lopez likes you."

Is he jealous? He's jealous.

I don't exactly hate this, but I don't want him to know that. I wrap the rest of my sandwich in foil and slurp my smoothie. "Nuh-uh. She's just nice. There's a difference." I break off a chunk of snickerdoodle and pop it into my mouth.

"The prettiest girl in camp likes you." Slammo leans back in his chair, grinning. "Riley's got some competition. Where's your scrunchie, anyway?"

"Whatever. Cut it out."

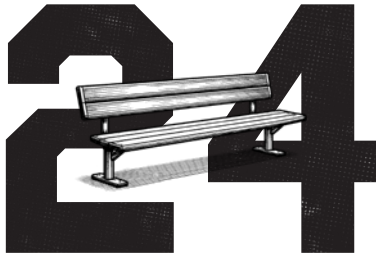
“I will. For now.” Slammo leans forward. “Anyway. Let’s join the guys.”

Before I can say anything, Coach Mac comes out of nowhere and steps up to the table. “I love the camaraderie fellas, but Spencer’s coming with me. Let’s take a walk, Spencer.”

In front of the entire cafeteria, Coach Mac puts his hand on my shoulder and walks me out of the building. Without a word, he walks me past the food court, past the tables full of players and summer school students, and past the indifferent cafeteria workers.

What’s about to happen?

CHAPTER



Coach Mac opens the practice gym doors. Two guys are on court four, shooting threes, but otherwise, the big building is empty. “Can we borrow one of these for a minute?” Coach plucks a basketball off the bench and keeps walking.

I can’t tell if I’m sweating from the afternoon heat or nerves.

We stop at court two, and I plop onto the baseline bench, ready to absorb whatever’s coming.

“What are you doing?” Coach Mac calls from center court. “Get over here. We’re going to do the pivot drill, just you and me.”

The pivot drill? My brain races while I push myself off the bench and jog to join him on the floor.

I stop across from him and brace myself to hear the worst.

“I’m not gonna sugarcoat things, Spencer. So far, you’ve really sucked. In tryouts, during practice, and in last night’s game. I’m sick of it.”

His words hit me like a freight train. I'm so shocked, I can't move. I can't speak. I'm not even sure I can breathe. Of all the things I thought Coach would say, I wasn't expecting this. But deep down, I know he's right. I hang my head, unable to meet Coach's gaze.

"Look at me."

I lift my head and look Coach Mac in the eyes.

His eyes soften, but they're still direct. "I'm sick of it because I know there's a really good player in there. A guy your height, you have tons of potential. With your skills, are you kidding me? You can already be a great player."

What is this? I can't tell if this is a pep talk.

"In middle school, most big guys are growing so much so fast, they can't walk and chew gum at the same time. But not you. You're naturally coordinated on the court. I woulda given anything to play like you in middle school. You've got such a soft touch on your shot—it's really beautiful, man."

My face twitches. "Thanks, Coach." Some of the feeling returns to my limbs.

"But I gotta tell you, none of that matters if you keep getting pushed around."

He pauses, and my fists clench. "I can't help being skinny."

Coach Mac holds a finger up. "I'm not hearing excuses. Almost every kid here is skinny. Skinny's not why you're getting pushed around and making mistakes. Our problem isn't your body. It's your brain."

"I don't understand."

“Coach Robinson warned me you’re a worrier. You don’t want to make mistakes. You get so worked up, you overthink everything.” He taps the side of his head. “While you’re playing in here, your opponents are out here. On the court. Knocking you off balance, taking the ball.”

My shoulders droop over my chest. “Maybe I don’t belong on the court.”

Coach drops the ball and firmly grasps my shoulders. He looks me straight in the eyes, but I can tell he’s not mad. “Coach Robinson knows ball. You think he would have invited you if you didn’t belong here? Do you think I’d spend my thirty-five-minute lunch break working with you if I didn’t think you have what it takes to be great? I had the first pick in the draft after tryouts, and I picked you.”

Wait. What?

“Why me? Why didn’t you take DJ? He’s the best player here, and he’s from Skyline like you.”

“Man, you could be as good as DJ. Even better. And everybody sees it but you.”

That doesn’t make sense.

“Yeah, right. Everybody here gives me a hard time.”

Coach Mac shakes his head. “Spencer. You’re six-foot-four. You’re a walking, talking target. Everybody and their little brother are going to challenge you. That’s the curse of the big man. It’s time for you to suck it up. You gotta learn how to fight back. That’s what the pivot’s for.” He tosses me the ball. “Let’s hoop. Your ball. Don’t think, just do.”

I spend the next twenty minutes tripping over my feet,

traveling, and fumbling the ball. Coach Mac walks off the court muttering to himself at one point, but after a moment, he returns. After a deep inhale and exhale, he bounces the ball to me, and I catch it on a jump stop.

Coach moves in.

I fake a shot.

Coach lunges in, fast, like a snake.

CLICK.

I plant my left foot, swivel my body back, then through.

I pivot around Coach Mac.

One quick dribble into the clear.

Rise up for a jumper.

SWISH!

My heart pounds in my ears. I did it.

Finally.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Coach Mac cups his hands around his mouth and booms across the gym, “HE CAN BE TAUGHT!”

“Great work, Spencer. I knew you could do it.” Coach gives me a high-five that almost knocks my hand off, and jogs off the court. “See you at the game, big man.”

YES! I feel eleven feet tall...right now. But what about at tonight’s game? Can I do it again? When there are people in the stands and my teammates and Coach Mac are relying on me?

CHAPTER



It's weird how much more relaxed I feel. At dinner, I take my time and make a custom steak, brussels sprout, sweet potato, and rice bowl with chimichurri sauce and a pineapple smoothie, then make my way toward the Mamba table.

My phone pings and I sneak a quick look.

It's from Sarah:

Sarah

See you soon! Good luck tonight!

"Everything good with you and Coach Mac?" Slammo leans in and asks as soon as I sit down.

"Yeah. We worked on some things, and I think I got it."

"Hey, Jon." Antonio polishes off a giant biscuit with fried chicken and gravy. "You going to watch your girlfriend in the three-point contest after dinner?" He looks up and grins. Next to me, Slammo cracks

up.

“All right, y’all.” I stab my fork into a juicy piece of steak. “She’s not my girlfriend, but I do want to catch the girls’ three-point contest.” I bite hard into the steak, trying to mask my embarrassment.

“Mhmm,” Antonio says. He wipes his hands on a napkin and pushes his chair back from the table. “Okay. Well, I’m gonna go grab a quick nap before the game. See y’all.”

“See ya at warmups,” Luis says.

“I wonder where Antonio could have gotten that idea about me and Sammie.” I shoot a look at Slammo.

“I wonder,” he replies smoothly.

We eat and listen to Charlie, Wayne, Derrick, and Luis debate pros and cons about superhero movie reboots. Slammo chimes in every so often with his very pro-reboot position. I’m firmly in the con camp, but I keep it to myself.

As everybody picks up their trays and heads out of the cafeteria, Slammo turns to me.

“You want to walk back to the dorms?”

“Um,” I pause. I actually do want to go watch the three-point prelims, but I don’t want to be teased about it.

“We can stop at the gym first if you want. Check out how the girls’ three-point contest is going.” He shrugs and tosses a glance toward the ceiling.

He wants to watch the girls’ contest, too.

“You’re not going to give me a hard time about it?”

“Nah, man, we were just messing around, I swear.” He swivels the gold chain around his neck until the part with his initials on it faces forward. “Whoever wins is going to have to shoot against me in the championship, right? I need to check out the competition.”

“Oh-kay.” I should’ve known. The Slammo swagger always makes an appearance. Whether he’s being serious or not, I bet he’ll find some excuse to give me a hard time. But what’s that saying? *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.* Maybe that’s exactly what I need to do.

We get to the arena and take seats as close to the front as we can find. The contest has already started, but Sammie hasn’t taken her turn yet.

Slammo leans over. “What’s that blonde girl’s name, Samantha’s friend?”

“Izzy, I think.”

“For being so tiny, she’s got a lot of power behind those shots.”

I turn toward the basket at the far end of the court where Izzy’s shooting. “How many shots has she made?”

He points to one of the girls’ coaches holding up a big card with the number eight on it.

The scorecard switches to nine after she makes another.

At another basket, Sammie’s bouncing gently on her toes, keeping her muscles warm.

The other girl currently shooting, I think her name is Tamira, misses her last shot and jogs off the court. Coach Watson passes Sammie the ball and resets the scorecard.

“She’s up,” Slammo nudges me.

“I’m right here, I can see.” I nudge him back.

Five racks, with five balls in each rack, are placed around the three-point line. Sammie stands next to the first ball rack and shakes the tension out of her neck and shoulders. The crowd quiets.

“Go Samantha!” Slammo shouts, and I want to crawl all the way under the seat.

Laughter ripples across the crowd. Sammie turns and waves to the crowd, laughing with us. “Thank you!” she shouts. She turns back to the basket, sets her feet, and fires off a perfect shot with immaculate cookie jar follow-through. SWISH.

“Dang,” Slammo mutters. “She’s not bad. Your girl Riley can’t shoot like that.”

“Riley is not my—you know what? Shut up.” I can’t help smiling.

Slammo laughs. “I couldn’t help it.”

Sammie puts up another four in a row, finishing her first ball rack, before I notice Coach Mac and a couple of Mambas hanging out by the locker rooms across the arena from us. I check my watch and elbow Slammo. “Time for pregame.”

“Shoot.” He jumps to his feet.

“No pun intended, right?” I slide out of the row, right

behind him.

“What?”

“Nevermind.” Mason would’ve gotten that bad joke. We hustle out of the stands and join our team as they’re entering the locker room.

It feels weird, killing time hanging out with Slammo. He’s still kind of full of himself, and he’s still a little obnoxious, but this afternoon wasn’t as horrible as it could have been.

CHAPTER



Tuesday Night: Game Two

Mambas (0-1) vs. Mustangs (0-1)

I'll give him this: Coach Mac was one hundred percent right when he said the big man always has a target on his back.

As soon as the whistle blows, I barely get across half court before a defender bodies me so hard that I stumble into my own shooting guard. It's sheer luck that I manage to stay on my feet. I look to the ref, thinking he's going to call a foul, but there's no whistle.

A few minutes later, Charlie hits me on a long pass. The Mouth and one of his teammates try to box me in, and I try to pivot out of trouble.

Wait. Which foot did I plant? Is this my pivot foot?

REEEEET!

The ref calls traveling.

Okay. That's how it's gonna be.

Coach Mac yells from the bench. "Spencer! Get outta your head! Play *your* game!"

I'm not exactly sure what my game is anymore, but I keep my head up and sprint back on defense. The Mouth is yapping something at me, but I can't even hear it. I know he's gonna challenge me because he thinks I'm soft, but I need to be tough and be ready for him.

With less than thirty seconds of gameplay left, we're tied at 42. I haven't played great, but I haven't been terrible, either. My offense hasn't really clicked, but I've blocked a few shots on D. It feels good to be helping the team.

Mouth has the ball outside the three-point line. He's dribbling the ball back and forth between his legs as the clock ticks down, and then BOOM! As soon as Slammo leans just an inch the wrong way, Mouth changes direction and explodes past him. There's only one thing now between him and the basket. Me.

Mouth picks up his dribble and takes a dramatic first step out wide to my left, but I don't bite on the fake. He got me with this move in the first half, but this time I'm ready. He tries slithering around me, but since I held my ground, he has to fire up a wild shot that misses off the rim. Slammo grabs the rebound, and Coach Mac yells for a timeout.

As I run to join the huddle, I see Grandad out of the corner of my eye. He's on his feet, yelling, "Great stop, Jon!"

“Okay, Mambas, you forced Cedric into a tough shot, great job.” Coach draws on his board and barks out instructions like a general leading us into battle. “Antonio, you’re gonna take it out and get the ball to Matthews. Matthews, you dribble up court and be quick with it, but in control. You know Cedric’s gonna be gettin’ after you.”

Coach Mac is wildly scribbling lines on the dry erase board. “Once Matthews gets over midcourt, Spencer is gonna cut from here to here. Matthews, then I want you to make a lob pass nice and high to Spencer at the top of the key.”

To Spencer?

“But Coach—”

Coach Mac doesn’t lift his head. “Spencer. This is not a discussion.” He doesn’t sound happy.

“What if I—”

The All-American superstar’s head snaps up. He stares a laser through my face. “There is NO what if. Stop thinking. Just play.”

His eyes return to the board and so does his marker. “After you make the pass Matthews, keep running to the hoop—”

Slammo’s eyes light up. “Then, when Cedric leaves me to go get all aggro at Jon, I’ll be wide open.”

“Bingo!” Coach Mac lifts his head with a smile. “A classic give-and-go.”

The horn blasts and ends our timeout.

“Out of bounds on the side, Mambas,” the ref yells.

REET!

Exactly like Coach Mac drew on his board, Slammo gets the ball and dribbles quickly up the left side of the court. Sure enough, The Mouth is hot on his heels. It's time for me to cut.

As I bolt to my position at the three-point line, Slammo lofts a soft pass high into the air.

Seven seconds left.

The crowd counts down along with the clock.

Six. Five.

The ball is coming toward me, and just like Coach predicted, so is The Mouth.

I catch the pass, and there's no time to think.

The Mouth leaps at the ball in my outstretched arms, and I see Slammo in the corner of my eye.

Four.

Just like Coach predicted, he's wide open.

Three.

With The Mouth closing in, I pass the ball back to Slammo as he heads for the basket.

Two. One.

Slammo takes a floater from ten feet out.

The backspin cuts through the air as the gym goes silent.

The buzzer sounds.

SWOOSH.

The crowd erupts.

He made it! We won!

The team rushes together.

I try to scan the crowd, but even though I'm taller than everybody, they're leaping and high-fiving, and all I see is hair, hands, and arms. Even Coach Mac runs up and celebrates with us before he pulls us off the court for a post-game huddle.

Slammo claps me on the back. "Nice pass, Jon!"

"Thanks. Great shot, Trey."

Wait? Did I just call Slammo, Trey? I did.

CHAPTER



“Jon!” Dad and Granddad wave as they weave between other families. Sarah sits on Dad’s shoulders and holds a bright yellow sticky note above her head. I’m guessing it says, “We love Jon.”

Dad lifts Sarah off his shoulders and sets her on the ground next to me. I kneel down and wrap her in a sweaty, stinky hug. “I’m going to smell like armpit all the way home,” she fusses.

“Where’s the rest of the crew?” I stand and dish out quick hugs to Dad and Granddad.

Dad runs a hand along the back of his neck. “They missed a heck of a game, didn’t they?”

“They did,” Granddad says. “Ian couldn’t keep any food down today, so your mom and Grandma Cassie stayed behind this time.”

“Is Alec sick too?” I ask.

“He’s okay, but Mom wanted him to stay home just in case.” Sarah pats me on the elbow, not-so-slyly leaving her sticky note on my skin. I’m so sweaty that it falls

off, but I pretend not to notice.

“Jon! Milkshakes in the lounge! You comin’?” Trey shouts.

“Milkshakes? I want a milkshake! Can we stop at Burger Barn on the way home? Pretty please?” Sarah clings to the outside of Dad’s leg.

“You better get a move on,” Grandad says to me.
“Milkshakes wait for no man. Great game.”

I drape my towel across the back of my neck. “Thanks for coming, y’all. See you tomorrow evening?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Dad peels Sarah off his leg, hoists her to his shoulders, and they head toward the exit.

CHAPTER



The cheers from the crowd are still buzzing in my head when Trey and I walk across the quad. As soon as we walk into the student lounge, everybody's eyes are on us. Half the room cheers—especially the rest of the Mambas.

“That was awesome,” I say.

“Did you see Cedric's face after that last shot?” Trey said. “He looked ready to explode!”

I nod, grinning. “Yeah, guess he underestimated the Mambas.”

Right on cue, the Mambas erupt in celebration again, raising their chocolate milkshakes in a toast.

If this is what winning a game feels like, I could get used to it.

Trey and I join the table, snagging our own shakes. I take a big slurp of creamy, chocolatey victory.

“Anybody in for some ping-pong?” Trey holds his

shake in one hand and a paddle in the other.

“Two-on-two?” Derrick wipes a whipped cream mustache from his upper lip. “Me and Wayne against you and Jon?”

“I don’t know, man, we don’t want to embarrass you or anything.” Trey tilts his head to one side and taps the edge of his paddle against the table. “What do you think, Jon?”

I stand, let out an exaggerated sigh, and flex my fingertips. “I’m in.”

“Deal. Winners play Sam and Izzy.” Derrick picks up a paddle and points to the two girls leaning against the wall.

Sammie narrows her eyes and nods slowly, like she’s sizing up the competition. “You’re on.”

We set our milkshakes aside and square up on either side of the ping-pong table.

“Let’s show’em how it’s done.” Trey cracks his knuckles and rolls his shoulders.

I turn my back to Derrick and Wayne and lean toward Trey. “You know I’ve never played ping-pong in my life, right?”

Trey laughs. “Me neither, but I watched my sisters play at camp once. This’ll be fun.”

I face Derrick and Wayne and crouch like I’m getting ready for tip-off.

Wayne places his paddle on the table, handle pointed up. “Call it.”

Trey calls red, but the paddle lands on black, so Wayne serves first. He smashes the tiny ball straight at the square in front of me. It hits once and flies into the window blinds behind us, narrowly missing Sammie and Izzy.

“You’re supposed to hit the ball back. With the paddle.” Derrick taps his paddle.

My hands are empty. My paddle lies flat on the table.

Everybody laughs, including me and Trey.

“Right. Yeah.” I casually slide the paddle off the table into my hand.

“He just wanted to give y’all a fighting chance,” Trey says.

Apparently, both Trey and I are very generous when it comes to giving Derrick and Wayne chances at ping-pong. Derrick and Wayne wipe the table with us and barely break a sweat. Me and Trey finish the game laughing so hard we’re crying.

“You two better stick to hoops,” Sammie says. She and Izzy step forward to take my and Trey’s places. Trey dramatically bows and offers his paddle to Izzy.

“Carry on the fight, milady,” he says. Izzy giggles.

I offer my paddle to Sammie. I have nothing clever to say. “Good luck.”

“No hard feelings if we crush your teammates?” Sammie raises her eyebrows at me.

“None at all,” I chuckle.

“What?! Jon?” Derrick and Wayne protest.

I shrug and shimmy out of the line of ping-pong fire. Trey hands me my milkshake as I join him again. “Once Sammie and Izzy are done with them, they’ll know how we felt.”

If Mason could see me now, having milkshakes and playing ping-pong with Trey. He would flip out. I can’t wait to catch him up on everything.

The lounge doors open, and immediately the hair on the back of my neck stands straight up. The Wolf Pack struts in.

Next thing I know, Mouth’s all up in my face. The Wall and Stache are right behind him. “Enjoy your sad little win while you can, Beanpole. Josue’s team is gonna destroy you.”

My neck tenses. He’s so close, I can smell the pizza he had for dinner. I don’t know if Mouth’s going to punch me or belch in my face, but either option stinks. A gagging feeling crawls up my throat, and I cover my mouth and nose with my hand.

Trey claps a hand hard on Mouth’s shoulder. “Take it easy, bruh. It’s just a game.”

Mouth chuffs, steps back, and whispers something in The Wall’s ear. It must have been funny, because they both glance over at me and laugh.

Behind him, Stache leans against the ping-pong table. “Come on, Sam. You and Izzy put the paddles down and come play foosball with me and DJ. You know you want to.”

Man, is this guy for real? Who talks to people like that? My fists clench.

“The only thing I want is for you to chill and walk

away. Now.” Sammie grips the paddle with one hand and taps it against her open palm.

Stache clutches his chest like his heart is mortally wounded. “You hurt me. Deeply.”

Yikes.

“Antonio! Hey! Where’d the music go?” Trey motions for him to pump up the volume.

Antonio cranks up some music, and the party picks up again.

You’d think Trey was the host, the way he visits with everybody and always has a smile on his face. I sip my victory milkshake and orbit around the edges of the group. I would be smiling and having fun too, if I wasn’t trying to avoid squaring up with those Skyline guys.

Now they’re rapping along with the beat, drawing a crowd of other campers who cheer and egg them on. The Wall, Mouth, and Stache are at the center of a big circle, showing off their dance moves and pulling faces like they own the floor. I don’t dare get any closer, knowing the extent of my skills are two line dances I learned in elementary school for some Western Week showcase.

“Y’all dance like a broken Roomba,” I say to myself. Out loud.

Unfortunately, at the exact moment I speak, Antonio’s playlist is interrupted by the world’s quietest ad. Everyone hears me. Including the three Roomba dancers.

Silence blankets the crowd. Not the good kind.

“Wow,” Charlie says. “How long you been working on that one?”

Mouth pushes his way past The Wall and Stache and heads toward me. “You think you’re funny, Beanpole?”

Suddenly, Sammie and Izzy are right next to me, ping-pong paddles in hand. In a flash, Trey grabs Antonio’s phone and changes the playlist to a Jasmine Cunningham mix. It’s a genius move, because suddenly all the girls scream and rush to the middle of the Wolf Pack’s dance floor, blocking Mouth from reaching me.

Trey comes over and nudges me. “Works every time.”

Pretty soon, the party’s winding down, but none of us, not even the Wolf Pack, gets to escape the clean up. The girls start handing out trash bags, and those who don’t have a bag must collect pizza boxes, milkshake cups, and empty two-liter bottles.

I wander around with my trash bag, and suddenly, Stache is walking up to me, a stack of pizza boxes in his arms. He shoves them aggressively into my bag.

“I’ll be coming for you Thursday night, Beanpole. Watch your back,” Stache threatens. Then, he stalks off toward Mouth and The Wall.

I thought our Mamba win would silence the Wolf Pack, at least for tonight. *Guess not.* They just *have* to remind me that they’re still coming. We may have beaten Mouth’s team, but Stache’s team has some talent. It’s gonna be a challenge.

Sammie makes eye contact with me across the lounge. She’s got a milkshake cup in her hand and points to

my trash bag. I hold it open for her, and she shoots the cup through the air. It arcs and lands with a satisfying swish in my bag.

I smile as she pumps her fist in victory. She makes her way toward me, and as she passes, leans in and says, “It’s exactly like you said. Broken Roomba. Hilarious.”

At least somebody here appreciates my corny humor. If only Skyline had more Sammies and less Wolf Packs.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. In these chapters, Coach Mac teaches Jonathan about the pivot. How can a pivot help a player handle pressure on the court, and how might this idea connect to Jonathan's life more generally?
2. Coach Mac directly names Jonathan's real problem. What advice does Coach give Jonathan, and why is this important?
3. Jonathan finally succeeds with the pivot drill after struggling with it. Why is this such an important moment for him?
4. "Slammo" becomes "Trey". How did that happen? What is going on with the relationship between Jon and his old rival?
5. Even after the Mambas win, the Wolves continue to create tension. Where do you think Jon's relationship with the Wolf Pack might be headed?

CHAPTER



Coach Mac spent half the morning telling us we need to get better at dealing with pressure and the other half putting more pressure on us in footwork, pivot, and shooting drills. I'm drenched in sweat, so after practice I run back to the dorm to change shirts before hitting up the cafeteria.

"Jon! Over here!" Trey calls.

I scan the crowded cafeteria and finally spot him, and all the Mambas, waving at me from a big table between a fake palm tree and a window.

I wave back, fill a plastic cup to the brim with pineapple smoothie, and slurp it while I make my way to the lunch table. Our Mambas lunch table. I don't even spare a glance at the solo spot in the corner I used to haunt.

Across from me, Antonio flares his nostrils and pushes away from the table in mock disgust. "Dude, you gotta start eating like a normal human."

Luis leans over. He inspects my carefully crafted stack of mashed potatoes, barbecue chicken, cornbread,

green beans, and spicy tortilla chips. “That ain’t lunch. That’s a science project.”

Trey pins his hand across his mouth, stifling a laugh.

“Y’all don’t appreciate the fine art of the flavor pile, that’s all.” I scoop a perfect bite onto my fork and chow down.

“I’m sorry, the what now?” Wayne blinks at me from behind his large soda.

“The flavor pile. See? Right here.” I use my fork to dissect the pile on my tray. “You want to mix the right stuff together to create the ideal flavor mix. Sweet, tangy, salty, creamy, crunchy. It’s all in there. Perfect proportions.”

Trey raises one eyebrow. “That sounds like something a dude who failed science would say.”

I point my fork at him. “I’ll have you know I got a B plus in science, sir. And an A plus in Culinary Arts.” I can tell by their faces they don’t know what Culinary Arts means. “Cooking Class.”

“You took Cooking Class?” Antonio snorts.

Trey laughs. “I bet you did. I also bet I can do better.” He looks around the table at everybody. “What do you think guys? Anybody else? Five minutes to build it. Best flavor combo wins.”

“No wasting food,” I add. “You gotta work with what’s on your plate.”

All eight team members look around the table at each other, like we’re all saying, “so, we gonna do this or what?” Then, in a flash, our lunch table becomes a mini kitchen laboratory.

Lucas stuffs a sausage patty between two cornbread muffins, topping it with a slice of pepper jack cheese and apple slices. For the finishing touch, he drizzles the whole thing in maple syrup.

“I need a judge’s ruling—are we allowed to share ingredients? Can I borrow Lucas’s maple syrup?” Charlie slowly stirs macaroni and Doritos together.

“What if I don’t want you to borrow my maple syrup?” Lucas gives him a hard side eye.

“What do you think, Jon?” Trey paints his hamburger bun with applesauce.

I stroke my chin, pretending to consider. “I’ll allow it.”

“Ha ha!” Charlie extends his hand, and Lucas passes the syrup.

Most of these combinations are straight-up crazy. But I’m excited to try a few of them. Lucas has a pretty interesting thing going on his plate with the cornbread-sausage sandwich. I’m less excited about Derrick’s pickle spear and chocolate pudding abomination. Mrs. Nonna says just because something is edible doesn’t make it food. She must have known someone like Derrick.

Trey’s timer goes off on his watch. “Get your forks out because we’re going to taste test one bite from each plate and vote for the winner. Ready?”

“Wait. We’re going to eat this?” Luis’s face tinges an odd shade of green.

“What did you think we were going to do?” Lucas wipes his fork on his shorts.

Before we can begin our test, a loud howl cuts through the cafeteria chatter.

“Mambas suck!” Across the room, at a smaller table, Mouth scowls. Josue grins and waves at us, waiting for our reaction. The Wall chuckles, then raises a fistful of birria tacos to his mouth.

Coach Mac’s voice rings in my ears. *Are you gonna let your opponent push you around?*

The hair on the back of my neck prickles. It’s one thing for the Wolf Pack to pick on me. But don’t mess with my team.

I push my chair back, stand, and shout. “Oh, yeah? Well, your team sucks too!”

Antonio tosses a biscuit at my face and whispers, “They’re all on different teams.”

Trey smacks a hand against his forehead. “Dude, you’re so not helping us.”

Around the room, a few players laugh.

Well, no going back now. I clear my throat and add, “The Mustangs, Cowboys, and Raptors are all equally bad!”

The Wolf Pack is totally unfazed. But then Charlie stands up and shouts. “You heard the man. They are equally bad!” He laughs so hard he wheezes.

“Equally bad!” Lucas yells.

“Whose granddaddy *are* you, bro?” Antonio grins, shaking his head. He raises his hands and starts chanting, “Eee-qual-lee bad! Eee-qual-lee bad!”

Pretty soon, the whole room is laughing—kind of with

me and kind of at me.

CHAPTER



Wednesday Afternoon

Boys' Three-Point Tournament Preliminary Round

We chant all the way over to the practice gym, and then Trey pulls us into a huddle in the shade just outside the doors.

“All right, y’all, you heard what Coach Mac said earlier. He was a three-point champ when he was a camper back in the day. He wants us to carry on his tradition. Let’s make him proud. Mambas on three. Ready?”

We put our hands in the center of the huddle and count off.

“One, two, three—MAMBAS!”

Coach Mac and Coach Robinson are at center court when the Mambas walk into the gym together. My mom would be proud. We’re standing tall, heads up, shoulders back. Except for the Wolf Pack, we’re the only ones walking in as a team, looking sharp. Every-

body in the gym turns and looks at us.

Is this what it feels like to be on a team?

Now I really, really don't want to embarrass myself.

We walk through our pre-practice stretches and take turns shooting free throws, then threes, until Coach Mac blows the whistle. "Huddle up, fellas!"

"Those of you who watched the girls' contest know how this works." Coach Mac nods at me and Trey. "But for those of y'all who didn't support your fellow campers, listen up. Five ball racks with five balls each are set up around the three-point line. That's 25 shots, for you math wizards. When it's your turn, start at this rack on the baseline, and then work your way around. The four who make the most out of 25 advance to the finals tomorrow. Questions?"

Nobody has any questions, so Coach Robinson jumps in. "Great. Line up. I'm watching you Matthews and Spencer."

"Let's go, Mambas!" Trey yells out.

After a few rounds of shooters, it's time for the final group that includes Trey and me.

Trey looks at me with a strange expression. "You nervous, Baby Socks?"

Is it all over my face? "A little, yeah."

"Remember last year when we had that free-throw contest, and you blew everybody away? Think about that. You got this, man."

Oh yeah! I made five free throws in a row, and my group didn't have to do pushups. I can't believe Trey remem-

bered that.

“Thanks, Trey.” I fist bump him and get ready next to my first ball rack.

A whistle blows, and the contest has begun.

I take a ball from the rack and set my toes just behind the edge of the three-point line. My shoulders tense up, so I shake them out again, then dribble once, twice, three times, and let it fly.

SWISH.

One down.

I'm in the driveway shooting with my siblings rebounding. That's all. No pressure.

SWISH.

My shoulders relax, my muscle memory takes over, and it's just me, the ball, and the hoop. Nobody and nothing else.

SWISH.

As I make my way from rack to rack, I hear Trey and the rest of the team whooping from somewhere behind me. I lost track of my makes a while back.

I line up my final shot. *CLANK.* It bounces off the rim...

None of the Mambas seem to care. They rush over from the sideline, and I get so many high fives my hand stings.

“Fourteen makes! Where've you been hiding this?” Lucas asks.

“Great question,” I laugh. “How many did you make, Trey?”

“Twelve! I’m in the finals too.”

“Yeah MAMBAS!” Wayne shouts.

“You up for some air hockey?” Derrick asks. “I know you can’t play ping-pong.”

“Yeah, I’m in.” My phone buzzes. “Let me check this real quick, and I’ll meet y’all over there.”

They’re still whooping and hollering as they leave the gym. I have a smile on my face as big as all get out when I pull my phone from my pocket. It’s from Sarah.

Sarah

Hey Jon, so sad I won’t be able to come to your game tonight. Ian’s still not feeling great. Mom said she’s taking him to the doctor tmrw. Once he gets some medicine I know he’ll be fine, but Alec’s scared. Just wanted you to know. I’d text you a picture of the poster Alec and I made you if your phone didn’t suck so bad. Oh wait it’s my phone now hahaha

A ripply wave of sad and guilt rises through my belly. I was so busy celebrating last night’s win that I totally forgot to check in with Sarah.

What kind of big brother am I? I feel like one of those taffy machines at the Tulsa State Fair. Pulled in all different directions. I slowly walk across the quad, texting

Sarah at the same time.

Jonathan

That stinks y'all won't be here tonight but there'll be other games. Sry Ian's not better but good he's going 2 doc. Alec might be goofing around for attn? If he's not, read him that dragon book he likes.

CHAPTER



Thursday Night: Game Four

Mambas (2-1) vs. Cowboys (2-1)

After a long day of more skills clinics and practices, it's time for game four. The arena air is heavy when I arrive for the game, the kind of thick, dirt-scented atmosphere that hangs in the sky right before an early June Oklahoma storm. My mood is a little heavy, too.

We won last night against the Klaws, but it's good my family couldn't make the game because I still didn't play great. I keep panicking when I have the ball, but at least I'm finding other ways to help the team besides scoring. I only had eight points, but I did get ten rebounds, a few blocks, and Coach Mac praised my attitude and effort. Thankfully, Antonio and Wayne each shot the lights out, and we won pretty easily.

It's hard not to think of home and wonder how my little brother is doing, but I'm about to go head-to-head with The Stache so I try to get focused.

At the entrance to the locker rooms, Coach Mac is on the phone. Across the arena, Stache and the rest of the Cowboys are huddled with their coach.

I stretch out on my own (from the floor up, of course), then run a few laps around the court. Jogging sends a head-clearing oxygen boost through my body and gets my pulse thumping, but the iron bars in my neck and shoulders haven't melted down yet.

I finish my laps, grab a ball, and dribble with a slow and steady pace to the three-point line. Bounce once, twice, line up, and swish.

"Spencer. You sure can shoot it." Coach Mac gives me a gentle punch on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Coach."

"Where ya been hiding those threes I saw during the contest? I should have been seeing those all week."

My face is lighting up Christmas red right now, I'm sure of it. "I don't know."

"Your job tonight is to let 'em fly. Make or miss, whatever. When you're open, take 'em." Coach points a long finger at my chest.

"But—" I stop short.

"But what?"

How do I say this without making Coach upset?

"Coach, the three-point contest was just for fun. No crazy aggressive defenders."

"Spencer, except for those goofy socks, you're more serious than anybody I know."

In my mind, I replay all the bad passes that have led to turnovers from the last couple games. My chest tightens. “What if I screw this up? I’ll disappoint the whole team. And you. Again.”

Coach Mac gently grips my upper arm and walks us over to a couple of chairs on the sideline. “How many shots do you think Michael Jordan missed?”

“Come on, we both know I’m no Jordan.”

“Humor me. Over all of his career. How many?”

“No idea, Coach.”

“More than nine thousand. Nine. Thousand. Shots. You know what else? He lost almost three hundred games. He missed a game-winning shot twenty-six times. Michael Jordan. The best player in the history of basketball lost more games than I’ve played in my entire life.”

“How did he keep going?” I ask.

Coach Mac crosses his arms in front of his chest. “He was never afraid to fail. MJ failed repeatedly. But he took every mistake and learned from it. Failure is fuel if you have the right attitude. I’m not saying you’re gonna be Jordan, but you’re already really good. If you’re ever gonna succeed, though, you can’t be afraid to fail. What do you say?”

What do I say? I look at Coach Mac’s eager face. I know he wants me to be fired up—to dig deep. Attitude and effort.

Michael Jordan is MICHAEL JORDAN. But I’m Jonathan Spencer, the guy who can’t walk up a flight of stairs without tripping and falling on my face. I appreciate what Coach Mac is trying to do, and camp

has been going better, but when the pressure's on, I've still been messing up.

I know what he wants me to say, so I say it. "I'll try."

Coach Mac leaps to his feet. "That's all I'm asking."

When tip-off finally arrives, I win it, and the Mambas are off and running.

Trey immediately kicks the tempo into high gear, flies up the court, and threads a pass to Antonio for a layup.

"Nice, Antonio!" Coach Mac shouts. He points at his eyeballs, then at me, like *I'm watching you, Spencer*.

Stache muscles his way into the paint, lowers his shoulder straight into Derrick, and banks in an easy two.

Charlie brings it back up the court. I have an open shot from deep, but I hesitate, and before I can call for a pass...

"Ball!" Trey hollers from the corner.

Charlie pivots away from pressure and passes to Trey.

Trey drains it from three, and I hear Coach Mac whoop from the sideline, then, "Nice pivot Char-lie! Good shot, Trey. Time to gimme something, Spencer."

In the second quarter, the pressure ramps up. Like a bad rash, Stache is everywhere. He rips the ball from Antonio and bulldozes into Derrick in the lane.

"Dude's playing football." I help Derrick off the ground. Stache is really throwing his overgrown mus-

cles around.

On my next possession, I cut through the lane, step inside, and a bulldog-looking kid named Marcus throws an elbow hard into my side.

I stumble, but I catch myself before I hit the floor.

No whistle.

Stache jogs past. "So, so soft."

We're tied at 22 when the third quarter starts.

Our shots aren't falling. Not Derrick's, not Trey's, and I've only made two baskets. Team Mamba looks gassed.

Trey jogs up alongside me. "You all right, man? We need you." He claps loudly and accelerates as he heads down court. "LET'S GO MAMBAS!"

I join in. "LET'S GO!"

The rest of the team picks up the pace and the energy. I run off a screen, cut to the corner, and that's when Stache sticks out his hip and buries it into my thigh.

"WOAH!" I lose my balance and tumble into the Mamba sideline.

I scramble onto my feet and hold up both hands to the ref, like, *Did you see that?*

No whistle.

"Whoops." Stache shrugs and looks at me with a grin. "Didn't see you there."

Coach Mac barks from the sideline. "Stop looking for a whistle and play! Nobody's gonna feel bad for you! Show them what you're made of!"

Trey hustles up, clapping his hands. "Let's go!"

Show them what you're made of...okay then.

The Cowboys quickly inbound the ball, and Stache is off to the races dribbling down the court. He's got a clear path to the basket, and I'm about ten yards behind him, but then something from somewhere inside of me takes over. An energy rushes through my body, and my legs start moving faster than ever. It's like Stache's taunting woke something up inside of me.

By the time Stache reaches the basket, I'm only a step behind. He lifts off for a layup, and even though I'm behind him, I jump too and go for a block. The energy rush surges into my legs and just before the ball gets rim height, I swat it as hard as I can, and it ricochets off the backboard.

Everyone in the gym lets out an emphatic, "OHH-HH!!!"

How did I get that high?

Derrick grabs the loose ball, and we head the other way on offense now. The energy rush hasn't left me.

"Derrick, set it up!" Coach Mac yells from the sideline. "Run the post-up play. Let's go, Spencer!"

I run down the court until I'm about ten feet from the basket and turn around to face Derrick. Stache is on me tight and gives me a shove to the lower back, but I hold my ground. I catch the pass from Derrick.

Here comes another Stache shove.

But instead of waiting for it, I dig my left foot into the ground and without even thinking about it, swing my body clockwise. *A pivot!*

Stache did try and get physical, but thanks to my fancy footwork, I leave him in the dust and get an easy wide-open layup.

“There he is! Coach Mac yells out as he jumps three feet in the air. “That’s what I’m talking about, big man!”

Running back down the court, I feel ten feet tall. The Stache looks at me, but it’s a different look than ever before. Is that fear? Is he the one who’s scared now?

It’s on...

The final buzzer sounds, and we’ve got our third win of camp. After my epic block and slick pivot move layup, we dominated the rest of the game and won easily. I finished the game with 16 points, and at one stretch, scored ten in a row with two three-pointers.

The Stache didn’t make a peep the rest of the game.

Across the court, I see a familiar face making his way toward me. It’s Grandad. I race over and hug him.

“What a game!” Grandad pretends to wipe sweat off his brow.

I scan the bleachers. “Where’s the rest of the crew?”

“Did Sarah not text you? Ian’s sick, and your folks had to work late, so it’s just me tonight. Cassie’s at your house with the kids.”

“Oh.” I wince. My phone’s back in the dorm. I’ve been so busy, I haven’t checked it since lunch. “Thanks for being here, Grandad.”

“Man, it’s great to see you playing fast and loose. You look like you’re having fun out there.” Grandad’s grinning from ear to ear.

He’s right. I did play fast and loose. I wasn’t afraid to fail and didn’t think too much.

This is fun.

CHAPTER



The Mambas are hanging in the student lounge, celebrating our victory, so I need to hurry. I want to grab my phone and check my texts. I almost make it across the quad to the dorm when I hear Trey and Luis shouting from the lounge.

“YO JONATHAN! THE PARTY’S THIS WAY!
DON’T MAKE US COME GET YOU!”

I squint in the direction of their voices. Yellow circles of light from the streetlamps spill across the dark sidewalk. Trey and Luis stand in the middle of one of the bright circles.

“COME ON, MAN!”

My phone will have to wait. I haul my tired legs across the pavement to catch up with them.

“We can’t celebrate without you, dude,” Trey says.
“Hey—did you see Antonio’s behind-the-back pass to Wayne in the second quarter?”

“I did! Wayne’s still feeling it, I bet.” Luis fires an imaginary pass to Trey.

I nod, grinning. “It was epic.”

We roll up to the student lounge doors and hear the bass thumping from the sidewalk outside. As Luis opens the door, Trey spins to the ground onto his knees and pops up into an awesome breakdancing move. Everyone inside starts cheering, asking for more.

I drop onto the end of the couch. Derrick spins a half-empty bottle of orange soda on the coffee table. “Tell it again, Antonio.”

“Don’t encourage him, bro.” Wayne shakes his head and stuffs a handful of corn chips into his mouth.

“Jon didn’t hear it.” Derrick offers me a bag of trail mix.

“Is this about your pass in the second quarter?” I pull the trail mix bag open and dump a handful of crunchy, chocolatey nuggets into my palm. “I saw it!”

Antonio re-enacts the whole play in slow-motion across the room like he’s a living highlight reel or something. It’s ridiculously awesome, and we’re all laughing and cheering.

Trey nudges me with his foot from across the coffee table. “Tell me I’m the best passer on the team. No. Tell me I’m the best passer you’ve ever played with.”

I roll my eyes. “You might be all right. That’s all I’m giving you.”

Everybody cracks up, and Trey fake sobs into a pillow. But then the lounge door opens, and the laughter screeches to a stop.

“Y’all celebrating like you won the playoffs.” Mouth

strides in, the rest of the Wolf Pack behind him.

Trey grabs Antonio's phone and pauses the playlist. "Look, man. We had a great game. Go grab a soda or something. Relax."

I don't know how Trey stays so calm and cool with these guys, but somehow it works for him.

Stache knocks my trail mix off the coffee table. "Enjoy it while it lasts. DJ's gonna eat you alive." He walks away.

"What's his deal?" I ask Trey. "Why are those Skyline guys always hating on me?"

Trey leans forward and looks at me like I sprouted antlers. "Do you really not get it? Jon. I know you're a country kid and all that, but wow."

I lean back and stare at the ceiling, then put my hands on my knees. "O Great and Powerful City Kid, please be kind to this lowly country critter and tell me. What do I not know?"

"Number one: they don't like any of us because we get to play for Coach Mac, and they're jealous. Number two: you're stupid tall and really good. You've got this whole klutzy, woe-is-me vibe going that I don't get, but when you get your head in the game, you're a threat to anyone on the court. You just don't see it. It's kind of annoying." Trey picks trail mix off the coffee table and pops it into his mouth.

Wayne nods. "True that."

I blink slowly. *Did Trey just admit that I'm good?* As much as I want to point that out, I say instead, "So, people hate on me because they're jealous?"

“I literally just said that. Duh.” Trey says. “It also doesn’t help that Sammie’s always talking to you.”

Wayne cracks up, wads an empty chip bag into a ball, and throws it at Trey’s head.

“Hey, Jon.”

I look up and see hair the color of maple syrup. It’s almost as if she was summoned by Trey’s last comment. Sammie stands behind the couch. “Hey, Sammie.”

“I heard you made the three-point contest finals tomorrow.” She’s smiling like she knows something I don’t.

I blink. “I did. Congrats on your win, by the way. Girls’ three-point champion.” A cheer goes up from all around the room. “Fifteen makes. Nice. Sorry I didn’t get to see it.”

Sammie smiles again. “It’s okay. I know you had a game. Isn’t 15 what you made in the prelims? So... if you win the boys’ finals tomorrow, it’s going to be you versus me in the three-point camp championship Saturday. How about we make it interesting?”

All chatter in the room goes completely silent.

Antonio’s eyebrows dart to the top of his forehead, and Derrick turns bright pink.

In the corner of the room, Stache looks like his brain short-circuited.

I realize Sammie’s waiting for an answer. “Uh, yeah. Cool. What did you have in mind?”

She rests one hand on her hip and holds the other out for a handshake. “How about the loser buys the win-

ner an ice cream sundae?”

I grab her hand and shake it, and it's like a jolt of electricity shoots up my arm. “You're on.”

“Cool.” She smiles. “Just so you know, my favorite sundae is hot fudge. No peanuts.”

“No peanuts...” I ask, “Why, are you allergic to nuts or something?”

Trey makes a strange choking noise. I immediately realize how dumb my question is.

But Sammie just laughs it off. “No. That's just the way I like it. I hope you're not allergic to some friendly competition, though. Good luck in the finals.”

Then, she walks across the lounge and confidently out the door, brown ponytail bouncing with each step.

The door closes behind her, and all the guys in the lounge look around, like *what just happened*.

Trey jumps over the coffee table and flops into the seat next to me. “Really dude? A nut allergy?”

I shush him. “What? It's a legitimate question.”

He shoves my shoulder. “Whatever you need to tell yourself. Somehow, you've still managed to score yourself two girlfriends. Maybe you could put in a good word for me with Izzy?”

I wave away his question, my attention shifting to the Wolf Pack sitting at a table in the corner, deep in conversation.

Wayne puts his feet up on the coffee table. “I heard Sammie's, like, the best shooter of all the girls and

probably all the guys too.”

“We saw her in prelims.” Trey punches my arm. “That tracks.”

“So what are you doing here in the lounge, dude? Shouldn’t you be out practicing? Time’s a wastin’.” Wayne folds his arms across his chest.

“Jeez, y’all.” I smile, but I feel my cheeks grow hot, and I wonder how red they are.

“Tick tock, Spencer,” Trey says, and the rest of the guys and I laugh.

CHAPTER



Friday Afternoon

Boys' Three-point Championship

Once again, the Mambas walk into the practice gym together. Heads held high, chests out, but this time, with a new addition. Coach Robinson applauds our fashion choice.

That's right. Mambas representing.

After lunch, the whole team came over to the Matthews/Spencer dorm room, and everyone got to pick out a pair of Jon Spencer's famous "baby socks" to borrow.

Trey and I are wearing ours onto the court for the three-point finals. The rest of the team will wear theirs in the stands to show their support.

The four finalists are Trey, me, The Wall, and a kid from the Emperors named Cole. We all shake hands with the refs, then head to our different baskets.

This is just like Coach Robinson's free-throw contest. Just like the prelims the other day. No pressure. Like Coach Mac says, "Just let 'em fly."

I stretch out my feet and ankles, then work my way up and finally, shake the tension out of my arms, shoulders, and neck.

Trey nudges me. "Miss one and the title is mine."

"Whatever, Slammo. Get back to your hoop."

Trey gives me a respectful shove and runs over to his first ball rack.

"Let's move, Mr. Matthews," Coach Mac yells across the gym. "OK, gentleman. This is the three-point finals, and you know the rules. On my whistle, start shootin' and whoever makes the most outta 25 gets the prize of losing to Sammie tomorrow."

REET!

Coach Mac blows his whistle, and the contest starts.

"Go MAMBAS!" Wayne shouts from somewhere in the bleachers.

I close my eyes, imagining every detail of my shooting form, then burst into action and grab the first ball. The texture of the leather, the weight of the ball, the push of my muscles all the way to my fingertips. *Release.*

I watch the ball soar high through the air and then fall towards the basket.

Swish.

"Alright, Jon. Great start!"

It's Coach Robinson's voice, and the same energy rush from last night's game begins flowing.

I grab the next ball and let it fly. It bounces softly off the rim. A miss. Who cares? Next ball. Another miss.

How many shots did Michael Jordan miss, again? No problem. I grab the next ball. *Release. Cookie jar. Swish.* I'm back on track...

In the distance, I hear cheers for Trey, The Wall, and Cole, but none of it matters. My mind is blurry, but it feels great. *I'm gonna win this thing.*

After grabbing the first ball from the second rack, I place my toes just behind the edge of the three-point line and lift the ball into position.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Shoot.

Follow-through.

SWISH.

The next minute or so is a blur, and before I know it, I've got the last of my 25 balls to shoot in my hands. I have no idea how many I've made.

I let it fly...

CLUNK—and there's a collective "AW!" followed by a huge cheer.

I look behind me at the scorecard ref.

Sixteen!

The Mambas leap to their feet and shout, then Coach Robinson and Coach Mac come over and present me with a goofy-looking paper certificate that says "Oklahoma Elite Summer Camp Boys' Three-Point Champion."

Motion catches my eye, and I look over to the doors. Sammie and Izzy are waving with both arms over their heads, trying to get my attention. I wave back, and Sammie starts making motions like she's eating an imaginary ice cream sundae and then flashes a smile across the gym.

I smile back, shake my head, and eat an imaginary sundae of my own. Sammie laughs, and the two girls turn to wherever they're going. Ponytails bouncing with each step.

CHAPTER

34



Friday Night: Game Five

Mambas (3-1) vs. Emperors (2-2)

“Ball!” Trey claps as he races out wide.

In the last few seconds of warmup, I swing the ball out to him. Derrick’s closing in, but Trey sends it up for three. Pregame jitters don’t seem to bother Trey. My stomach, on the other hand, feels like I swallowed a live eel. Everything’s squirmy inside.

Coach Mac blows a few short blasts on his whistle and calls us to the huddle. “Do y’all want to play for the championship tomorrow?”

“Yes, Coach!” we shout.

“These next four quarters will decide who’s playing and who’s watching from the chairs. Do you want to watch from the chairs?”

“No, Coach!”

“Me neither. So you set the tone. You set the pace. Watch each other’s backs and play smart. Give everything you’ve got.”

“Yes, Coach!”

“There it is. Let’s lock in. Mambas on three.”

We throw our hands in the middle, count down, and shout, “MAMBAS!”

I grab a swig of water and scan the crowd for my family. That’s when I see Grandad, but he’s not in the bleachers. He’s making his way along the sidelines, right toward Coach Mac.

Huh? What’s Grandad doing?

He taps Coach Mac on the shoulder, and when Coach turns, I can’t see either of their faces as they start talking. *Is it serious? Why else would Grandad interrupt Coach right before our game?*

Then, Coach Mac scans the sidelines, and his eyes lock on me. His face looks concerned. “Spencer, over here,” he calls.

It takes a second for my body to catch up with my brain. I jog over.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“It’s Ian,” Grandad says. “He got worse today, and your parents called an ambulance to take him to the hospital to run some more tests.”

Ambulance? Hospital? Tests?

“What?” My voice cracks. “Is he okay?”

I thought he just had a cold, or a weird virus, or even

something stupid like he ate too many hot dogs and cookies or something. Nothing hospital-visit worthy. Poor Ian.

I've been so worried about failing at basketball that I completely failed as a brother.

My hands shake, and everything I ate for lunch threatens to come back up.

"It's all right. He's getting the help he needs," Grandad's steady voice continues. "Everyone's there now, and I told your folks I'd come get you so we can all be together."

I nod, but I'm not totally here. *It's all right? All right? What if Ian's more sick than we thought? What if they don't know what's wrong with him?*

Coach Mac's hand finds my shoulder. "Go, Spencer. Family first. Your teammates have your back here."

"Thanks, Coach," I say.

I follow Grandad out of the gym, glancing over my shoulder as I go. Just a few minutes ago, I was about to take the court alongside my team. The championship is on the line. The Mambas have become like family this week, and as hard as it is to walk away from them when they need me, my family is my *first* team. And Ian needs me right now. That's all that matters.

The Mambas are huddled with Coach Mac. They're ready.

The game will go on without me.

Right now, I have someplace else to be.

CHAPTER



Before we even get to the visitor's entrance, my nostrils burn from the hospital smell. It's a weird mix of antiseptic, latex, and lime jello—stinky and sweet—and it brings back awful memories of my trip to the emergency room last fall when I dropped Dad's toolbox on my foot.

We weave our way through the lobby to the elevators and travel to the fourth floor. My whole body feels like a stretched rubber band, ready to snap. I prepare myself for the inevitable shock of seeing Ian in a hospital bed, pale, probably sleeping or semi-conscious. He'll have all types of tubes hooked up to his arms and one of those *beep-beep-beep* monitor thingies too, most likely. He'll need me to be strong for him—to help him be brave. Coach Robinson's post-tryout talk comes back to me, and I remind myself to *be tough*.

I step into the corridor with my head held high and a steady smile plastered on my face. My insides might be scrambled eggs, but my outsides are a concrete wall of brotherhood.

"This way, bud." Grandad guides me past a nurses'

station decorated like a steam train, with a banner above it that reads, “All Aboard the Wellness Express.”

The door to room 2410 is open, but Grandad knocks anyway. “I brought you a surprise.” He walks in, and I linger behind a second to take a deep breath and steel myself for what I’m about to see.

The first voice I hear belongs to my dad. “Good. You both made it. Come on in.”

Okay, this is it. I’m going in.

The room is small and painted pale blue. Ian’s propped up against an enormous pile of pillows. A thin, clear tube connects his arm to the *beep-beep* machine, and a pair of wires snake through his blue hospital gown to hook into a heart monitor. He looks tired, but otherwise, he’s awake and smiling.

Okay, the worst part is over.

“Jon,” Mom says, almost like a sigh. She rises from her chair at Ian’s bedside. Grandma Cassie, Sarah, and Alec are here too, sitting in uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs.

“I’m sorry you had to miss your game tonight,” Mom says, wrapping me in a hug.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. As much as I wish I could be playing with my team right now, I know this is exactly where I should be.

“You look like you saw a ghost,” Ian says. His voice sounds weaker than usual, but he’s still got that mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

I shuffle to the end of his bed. “I guess I’m not used to seeing you in a hospital bed.”

Ian shrugs. "It's actually kinda nice. The people around here give me whatever I ask for."

"Ian," Dad chuckles. The room feels a little bit lighter.

"So what happened?" I ask. "I thought Ian just had like the cold or flu." I think back to before I left. He was always sleepy and sick to his stomach. I honestly didn't think much of it. Guilt begins to settle in my stomach. *Why didn't I say anything to Mom and Dad sooner?*

"We thought the same," Mom replies. "I even took him to the doctor. We still didn't have answers, and then today, Ian passed out, and we knew something more serious was going on."

"Mom called an ambulance! It was like WEE-WOO!" Alec chimes in.

"Alec, honey, let's be more quiet for your brother," Mom pats Alec's head.

"I'm right here," Ian says.

The whole thing sounds really scary. I can't believe I wasn't there to help my siblings. *What a great big brother I am...*

"I knew something was off about Ian before I left," I confess. "He wasn't acting like himself. He wasn't telling any bad jokes or making up games. I should have said something..." I trail off, trying to sort out the jumbled thoughts in my head.

Dad puts a steady hand on my shoulder. "Hey, J-man. There's nothing any of us could have done to prevent this. We were all caught off-guard. The good thing is we'll know more soon."

Caught off-guard. That sounds like my first few days of

camp. There were so many unexpected things that threw me off: Trey being my roommate, chaotic try-outs, failing at my first game. It was overwhelming.

A soft knock sounds on the door, and an older man in a white doctor's coat steps in. "Hello Spencers. I'm Dr. Sheppard. We've received the results of Ian's tests."

"Yes?" Mom grips Dad's hand in hers. "What can you tell us?"

I grip the railing at the end of Ian's bed, preparing myself. *Be tough, Jon.*

Dr. Sheppard flips through some papers on his clipboard. "We've confirmed that Ian has type one diabetes—which is an autoimmune disease. This means his immune system attacks the cells in his body that produce insulin. Insulin is a hormone that regulates blood sugar, so that's why he's been so tired and weak."

I've heard of this before. I just thought diabetes was usually something older people got. "There's a cure though, right?" I ask. "He'll get better?"

The doctor gives me a kind smile. "The disease is manageable, and Ian will be able to live a mostly normal life. He'll just have to make some changes to help his body get enough insulin. We have medicines and diet recommendations that will help Ian get back to his old self very soon."

Though the doctor's voice is upbeat, what I'm hearing is that there's no cure. Flutters of panic, like the wings of a hundred bats, flap against my ribs. *It's manageable?* What does that mean? He'll have to live with this his whole life? What if he gets sick again, and I don't see the signs? What if he forgets to take his medicine or eats the wrong thing?

I feel shaky, and next thing I know, I've plopped down onto the end of Ian's bed. I hear Mom and Dad talking some more to the doctor, but their voices sound far away. Then a small, slightly cold hand touches mine.

"Jon, you okay?" Ian asks.

Is my little brother really asking me if I'm okay right now? I look at him, and Ian doesn't seem worried. He gives me a small smile. *Wow, now that's one tough kid. How is he not totally freaking out right now?*

Mom's at my side now. The doctor has left the room for the time being. "This is going to take some time for us all to get used to, but we've made big changes before, right?" She looks up at Dad. "Some good news in all this is that Dad's hired me to work at the auto-shop, so I can be closer to home from now on."

That is good news, and must be why Sarah hasn't texted about parent fights the last few days. But my brain is still swirling with questions.

"What if Ian gets sick while he's at school? What about going to birthday parties? What if he gets sick at a birthday party? And he's a twin. What if Alec has this, too?" My head is throbbing with all the what ifs.

Mom touches my arm. "Sweetheart. I love how much you love your brothers. But let's not borrow trouble. Let's focus on the things we can control, and not worry about the rest. Okay? Right now, the best thing we can do is stay calm."

She sounds like Coach Mac when he was telling me to stop overthinking and just play my game. *When the trouble comes and the pressure's on, what did Coach say?* To pivot.

"Like Coach Mac taught us in camp this week, we have

to pivot,” I say.

“Pivot?” Ian asks.

“Yeah.” I stand up and show Ian and the rest of my family what I mean. “When you’re in trouble on the court, the pivot helps you adjust and stay in control. See?” I plant my left foot and pretend like I’m holding a basketball. Then, I pivot on my right foot. “Instead of panicking when defenders are on you, you can stay calm and find another option.”

Grandad comes over and rests a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Sounds like you’ve been learning a lot this week, Jon. That’s exactly what our family is going to do. Stay calm, pivot, and find the best path forward for our team.”

“PIVOT! PIVOT!” Alec and Sarah begin chanting. Everyone laughs, even tired Ian.

There’s so much I can’t control. I can’t control whether anyone gets sick, or hurt, or feels scared. Just like I can’t control how my teammates play, or if The Wall wants to talk to me, or whether the ref calls an obvious foul or not.

But I can control what kind of brother I choose to be. Am I the kind who freaks out and freezes? Or am I the kind who stays calm?

I can control what kind of basketball player I want to be. Am I the kind who gets pushed around and quits? Or am I the kind who gets tougher and stronger, who pivots and looks for the best option for my team?

Suddenly, my phone starts blowing up. I check my texts, all of which are from Trey.

Trey

MAMBAS WON! PLAYING TMRW NITE 4 THE CHAMPIONSHIP!

We brought the heat 2 nite!

Shoulda seen Wayne. A PASSING MACHINE!

Emperors didn't stand a CHANCE!

And Sammie says hi.

"No way!" I can't keep the grin from my face.

"Good news?" Dad asks.

"My team won! We're playing in the championships tomorrow!"

Mom plants a kiss on my head. "That's amazing, sweetheart! We'll be there."

"Really?" I ask.

"Of course," Dad says. "Now get on back to camp. You've got a big day tomorrow. We've got things covered here."

My body feels ten times lighter.

My team is celebrating. My family is doing well. And tomorrow, I'll have another chance to hoop.

A nurse in pink scrubs comes to change Ian's IV. Ian peers at her hands as she clamps the IV tubes, carefully cleans his arms, and inspects the new bag of fluid. He's curious, but more than that, he's fearless. He'll be fine. I know it.

He catches me staring at him. “Glad you got to see me, huh?”

That’s our Ian. He calls it like he sees it. “Definitely.”

Grandad tugs on my arm. “Let’s get you back to camp.”

“Yes, sir.” We hug everyone goodbye before we go. Leaving the hospital, I realize that for the first time in a while, I can see a clear path ahead. And I’m ready to give it everything I’ve got.

As we climb in the truck, though, my stomach growls.

“Do we have time to stop at Burger Barn? I could use a milkshake.”

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. In these chapters, Jon begins to understand the pivot in a deeper way. How does the meaning of the pivot grow from a basketball skill into something more?
2. How do these chapters show that the Mambas have become a team and not just a group of players?
3. When Jon learned that Ian is in the hospital, he cannot control everything that is happening. What does he realize he can control?
4. What do these chapters show about the kind of teammate and big brother Jon is becoming?

CHAPTER



“Rise and shine, roomie!” Trey thunks my head with a pillow.

“Not cool.” I roll over and yank the covers over my head.

“It’s championship day!” *Thwack.* He does it again. Harder.

So this is how it’s gonna be, huh?

I sit up, plaster a fake furious scowl on my face, and then pitch my pillow at him. He dodges the fluffy missile, and it thuds against the wall.

“Mambas breakfast in ten minutes.” Trey retrieves my pillow and fires it back at me, but this time I catch it.

“Last one there has to eat grapefruit with mayonnaise on top.” I toss my pillow back onto my bed, pull on my practice T-shirt, and race down the hall.

When we get to the cafeteria, our table is already set with overflowing plates of cinnamon sugar biscuits, stacks of breakfast meats, heaping mounds of scrambled eggs, platters of pancakes, and tall pitchers of

freshly squeezed juice.

“What’s all this?” Trey asks. “Is this for us?”

I look around the room at the other tables. None of them looks like ours. Most of the other players are waiting in line or eating at regular-looking tables, the kind that don’t look like a family of ten is about to sit down on a Saturday morning.

Antonio nibbles a syrup-coated pancake and shrugs. “Me and Wayne got here early. We figured if we have the food already here, that gives us time to hang out. I dunno.”

“Thanks, guys.” I take two empty plates from the stack at the end of the table and pass one to Trey.

Wayne gulps down the last swallow of his orange juice and pours himself another glass. “No big deal. Is your brother okay?”

Chatter around the table quiets.

“Yeah.” I load buttery toast onto my plate, suddenly very aware of everybody staring at me. “He’s got type one diabetes, but he’s gonna be alright.”

“Whoa. My grandma has diabetes.” Charlie says. “She has to check her blood and take shots all the time, and she can’t eat sugar.”

“Derrick can’t eat sugar, can you Derrick?” Luis elbows Derrick, who shakes his head.

“I can eat sugar. I just don’t like it. I’d rather have salty stuff.” Derrick says.

Across the room, a chorus of howls erupts. Derrick’s eyebrows raise. Luis sets his fork filled with scrambled

eggs on his plate and turns in his seat, looking for the Wolf Pack.

I turn around too, scanning the crowd, and spot The Mouth and Stache striding across the cafeteria. Behind them, The Wall rises from his chair in the corner. I think back to the first time I met these guys and how intimidated I was by them. They said they're targeting me because they're jealous, and I wasn't sure what to think. Now, as I watch them shove their way through food lines and elbow people while they're eating, I realize they're not intimidating at all. They're less like wolves and more like puppies. Noisy, slobbery puppies.

The Mouth tosses his head back and lets a howl fly as he and Stache approach our table.

I put my napkin on my plate, push my chair away from the table, and stand.

"Can I help you, fellas?"

"Mambas are going to lose, Beanpole. DJ's going to crush you."

The Wall stands behind them, arms crossed.

"Thanks for the warning." I flash them both a friendly smile. "Now, if y'all don't mind, my team and I are trying to have a meal." I hold one arm out, inviting them to leave.

Stache chimes in, nostrils flaring. "Mambas suck!"

Trey, Charlie, and Wayne rise from their seats and stand next to me. The cafeteria, usually filled with chatter, quiets.

Derrick, Luis, Antonio, and Lucas push their chairs

back and stand.

I jut my chin toward The Wall. “We’ll decide it tonight on the court, won’t we?”

Stache and Mouth turn toward The Wall, waiting for his response. The Wall nods slowly, turns, and walks out of the cafeteria. Stache and Mouth trail him, jawing to each other the whole way.

I smile at my team and settle back into my seat. “Can somebody pass me the pancakes, please?”

It feels good to be a Mamba.

CHAPTER



Saturday Morning

Three-point Tournament, Camp Championship

“Y’all know how this works.” Coach Mac shakes Sammie’s hand, then mine. “Start shooting on my whistle.”

“Good luck.” Sammie extends a hand, and I shake it.

“You too.”

I walk slowly to the first ball rack at the three-point line, scanning the crowd for familiar faces. The girls fill the first rows of bleachers on one side of the gym, and all the boys are on the other. Well, except Trey. Of course he’s in the middle of the girls grinning from ear to ear. I spot Izzy front and center, holding a handmade sign that reads, “We <3 Sam.”

Coach Mac yells out, “Take it easy on him, Sammie.” He blows the whistle. The crowd erupts. Mostly with high-pitched shrieks for Sammie, but some for me too.

Thanks guys.

I close my eyes, breathe deep, and imagine myself once again in the CMS gym, shooting free throws. Now I open them and focus on the rim. *Time to let it fly.*

I line up, shoot, follow through, and watch the ball sink into the net.

That's one.

I grab another ball from the rack and repeat the process.

Two.

I shake the tension out of my shoulders, stand up taller, and shoot three more in a row.

Five.

Five for five. I'm feeling great as I move to the next ball rack. Then I hear a collection of girls scream out, "FIVE!"

We're tied.

At the next rack I make three, but I know Sammie made four thanks to screams of, "NINE!" I can't help but glance at the crowd, and the girls are going wild.

"Come on, Jon!" Trey whoops.

I make two at each of the next two racks and hustle over to the last one.

When it's time for my final shot, I take a little extra time to soak in the moment before releasing the ball high into the air. It sails in a magnificent arc, falls perfectly, and—

SWISH.

The crowd roars.

But not for me.

I turn around. My scorecard says fifteen. *Not bad.*

Sammie's says NINETEEN!

The girls rush the court and surround Sammie, but she eventually pushes past them and walks over to Coach Mac and me.

"Congratulations." I shake her hand.

"Thanks." She flashes me a huge smile, and ZAP, it's like lightning struck the top of my brain. "Remember—no peanuts."

Izzy and a few other girls pull her back into the throng for pictures and congratulatory hugs.

Coach Mac smiles big and pats me on the shoulder.

"You had no chance, brother. You can shoot it, but that young lady CAN SHOOT IT."

We both laugh.

Losing never felt better.

CHAPTER



I walk into the arena behind Trey for the last morning meeting of camp. The Mambas occupy the second row of chairs on the arena floor, where in a few hours we'll be playing for the camp championship. The whole room is buzzing, even more than it was on the first day.

Coach Jones and the rest of the coaching staff walk out onto the stage to huge cheers.

He walks up to the microphone. "What a week!" He holds his hands up, palms forward, asking for quiet.

"It is my privilege to speak to y'all on your last day of this year's Oklahoma Elite Camp. I know we're all excited to watch the Girls' and Boys' Championship finals, so I'll keep it short and sweet. As some of you know, each year the coaching staff nominates players for awards, and this year is no different."

"Woo!" Someone from the crowd shouts, and a ripple of laughter floats through the crowd.

"Before we get to the awards, I'd like to announce the winner of our all-camp three-point contest. This

year's finalists were Jonathan Spencer from Collins and Samantha Lopez from Skyline. And our winner—

“Sammiieeee!” A shrill wave of high-pitched screams interrupts Coach Jones and sweeps over the crowd.

“It's Samantha Lopez,” Coach Jones chuckles. “Congratulations, Samantha.

“Our first award is the Captain Award. It's presented to the player who motivates and encourages their teammates on and off the court. The girls' Captain Award goes to LaTania Moore, and the boys' Captain is Trey Matthews.”

Yes!

“YEAH TREY!” I jump to my feet and cheer, along with all the guys in our row. I can't believe I'm admitting this, but Trey's a natural for this award. He was the one who insisted we have meals together as a team. He's always encouraging everybody. And when things got tough on the court, he always stayed positive.

Trey walks up to the podium, Slammo strut replaced with a grateful smile. He shakes Coach Jones's hand, receives his trophy, and holds it high.

“Next, we have the MCP—the Most Consistent Performer Award. This one is exactly what it says—an award we give to the player who puts their best effort into their game, day in and day out. They show up, work hard, and get their business done. I'm thrilled to present this year's MCPs to Samantha Lopez and DJ Falwell.”

From the end of the row behind us, a group of guys shouts, “Woo! DJ!” The Mambas and I chant, “Sam!

Sam! Sam!” as Samantha collects her trophy.

“Finally, we have a new award this year. We’ve named it the Rebounder Award. This award goes to the players who may have encountered a setback during the week but demonstrated grit and effort and came back strong. It’s my pleasure to present the Rebounder Awards to Jessica Vanderkirk and Jonathan Spencer.”

Did I hear him correctly?

From the back rows, I hear Mouth and Stache shout, “Spencer sucks!”

But then, the Mambas bolt to their feet, and Trey reaches down and pats me on the back.

Who cares what the Wolf Pack thinks when you have Mambas.

“Way to go, man! Get out there!” He pulls me to my feet and practically shoves me out of the row into the aisle. “Go on!”

I can’t believe this. After I had such a horrible tryout and disastrous first day, I didn’t think I had what it took to be here. Then I wanted to go home. And now I get an award?

As I make my way to the podium, I meet Coach Mac’s gaze, then Coach Robinson’s. They’re both smiling and clapping for me. I know I wouldn’t have gotten this award without their help.

My chest feels like there’s a glowing, warm fire inside of it as I hold my trophy in my hand and pose for a photo with Coach Jones. The legendary coach shakes my hand. “Keep up the great attitude and effort, Jon. Congratulations.”

He dismisses us to the championship game. As we make our way toward the locker room to meet Coach Mac, every couple of steps someone stops me to say “Congratulations!” or “Way to go!”

I can't believe the week I thought would never end is almost over.

I can't believe I'm actually a little sad about it.

CHAPTER



Saturday Afternoon: Camp Championship Game

Mambas (4-1) vs. Raptors (5-0)

The bleachers are packed, and a rumble of excitement fills the gym.

At our bench, Coach Mac pulls us into one last pre-game huddle.

“It’s been a great week, gentlemen, and it’s been a lot of fun coaching you. You’ve shown great attitude and effort, and just like Coach Jones promised, since y’all did that, you’ve gotten tons better as the week has gone on.”

The rim on the other side of the court rattles, and the crowd lets out a huge, “OHHH!” The Wall must’ve just thrown one down during warmups. He’s the only kid in camp who can dunk.

Coach Mac sees the worry in our eyes.

“These guys are undefeated, and they’re really good,

but so are we. We didn't get to this championship game by luck. You earned it and you belong. We gotta try and keep DJ off the boards, and that's gonna take an entire team effort, so everybody has to box out for rebounds. On defense, Spencer, you've got him. DJ is a good shooter, but I'd rather him shoot jumpers than dunks, so stay between him and the basket. On offense, let's use our speed, get out and run, and when you're open, let 'em fly."

"Yes, Coach!" we shout.

Coach Mac puts his hands in the center. "What do you say? We gonna win this, or what?"

"Yes, Coach!" We put our hands in and shout, "Mambas!"

Me, Trey, Antonio, Wayne, and Derrick take the court, and the crowd is cheering. The whole camp is here, plus all our families.

I shake the jello feeling out of my legs and line up at center court for tip-off. The Wall lines up across from me. Our eyes are at the same level, but I feel small. He's massive.

The crowd quiets down, except for one small voice.

"Go, Jon!" I smile. I know that voice. Sarah's here.

And just like that, the horn sounds, and the ref tosses the ball into the air. Before I can react to the tip-off, The Wall blasts off the ground. I try to catch up to him, but there's no use. He easily gets his hand to the ball first and tips it towards a teammate, but Antonio anticipated the move, steps in front, snatches the ball, and blazes down court.

"That's it, Mambas!" Coach Mac hops down the side-

line. “Let’s go!”

“Open! Open! Open!” Trey hollers from the corner. Antonio hits him with a pass, and Trey takes the shot, but just as he releases the ball, The Wall comes out of nowhere and blocks it into the stands.

“OHHH!”

This is going to be tough.

Derrick’s layup bounces off the backboard and as soon as it falls through the basket, Coach Mac booms, “Time out!”

“OK, Mambas. You did it.” In the huddle, everyone has nervous energy. Even Coach Mac. “We fought all the way back, and we’re in this thing.”

The game started slowly for us, and we got behind early. The Wall was dominant in the first half—scoring easily, rebounding, and blocking shots—and the Raptors were up by fifteen at halftime, but Coach Mac made an adjustment that changed the game.

For the second half, we came out in a full-court-press style of defense that really put the pressure on. Our aggressiveness forced the Raptors into lots of turnovers, and we were able to claw our way back into the game with fastbreaks. Now we’re only down one, but there’s only ten seconds left, and it’s the Raptors’ ball.

“Spencer and Matthews, I want you both on DJ. Double team him, and don’t let him get the inbounds pass. Then Wayne, Antonio, and Derrick, I want you to foul whoever does get the ball. We’ll see if they can make free throws.”

The horn sounds.

“Let’s go, let’s go! Dig deep!” Coach Mac shouts.

We break the huddle with a “Mambas,” and find our men to guard.

The ref blows his whistle and hands the ball over to the Raptor inbounder.

Trey and I deny any passing lane to The Wall, so the inbounder has to pass to a guy named Craig who Antonio fouls immediately.

REET!

“Foul on number twenty,” the ref yells. “OK, gentleman. Let’s lineup for free throws. We’re shooting two.”

We take our places around the Raptors’ basket, lined up around the key. I’m closest to the basket on the left side. The Wall is beside me to my right. The ref hands the ball to Craig for his first free throw, and the poor kid looks like he just saw a ghost.

I don’t think he’s going to make these.

Half the crowd is quiet, and half is going nuts. Craig dribbles twice and then shoots. It’s a flat shot that never had a chance, hitting the back of the rim and bouncing off to the opposite side of where I’m stationed.

“Box out strong, Jon! This is your board.” It’s Coach Robinson.

The ref gets the ball back to Craig for his second free throw, and now he looks like he ate the ghost. My heart is pounding.

The second shot goes up, and it hits the rim again, but this time it bounces off to my side.

“Box out Spencer!” Coach Mac is so loud it sounds like he’s in my ear.

I widen my stance, and the ball starts falling toward me. The Wall slams his body into me, but I hold my ground and then leap up and grab the rebound.

The Wall is now all over me with his hands frantically trying to get to the ball.

“You’re OK, Spencer!” shouts Coach Mac.

Earlier this week, I would have panicked in this situation but not anymore. The Wall’s defense on me is as aggressive as any I’ve faced, but I’m fine. I hold the ball tight, have my elbows out in a strong position, dig my left foot into the ground, and pivot away from the pressure.

“Jon!”

It’s Trey. He’s open for an outlet pass. I make it, and we’re off and running.

“SEVEN.” The crowd yells.

“SIX.”

Trey races down the court with a Raptor closing in on each side.

“FIVE.”

He makes it all the way to the basket, but then you-know-who is there to close off the opening. After my outlet pass, The Wall left me behind and sprinted all the way to the other end of the court.

“FOUR.”

With The Wall in between him and the hoop, Trey jump stops into triple-threat position and then pump fakes a shot. The Wall takes Trey’s fake and jumps high into the air. I’m trailing the play and cross the three-point line. About fifteen feet from the ball.

“THREE.”

“Trey!” I shout, and he spins away from the Wall and looks right at me.

“TWO.”

My sixth-grade enemy, who has become my friend, zips a chest pass to me that hits me perfectly in the hands as my left and then right feet step into position. Shoulder width apart.

I got this.

The crowd yells “ONE” just as the last bit of leather leaves my fingers.

The gym is silent.

Then the horn blares.

SWISH!

YES!

The arena explodes with noise.

Coach Mac practically flies into the air. Derrick drops onto his knees. Trey tackles me.

We won!

From beneath a celebration swarm, I see a huge, meaty

hand reach down toward me. I grab it, and DJ pulls me up.

We stare at each other for a moment.

“Great game, Jon.” We shake hands.

I double-take, not sure if that deep voice belongs to DJ or some barrel-chested old man.

“You deserve the win.”

“Thanks. Great game to you, too. Y’all didn’t make it easy for us.”

The Mouth storms over, his fists clenched tight. He’s so amped up that he shoves DJ in the chest. “Y’all were robbed, man. Robbed! Unbelievable! Was the ref blind or something?”

Stache nods. “Yeah, man. That ref was the same one we had on Tuesday night. Dude needs glasses.”

DJ sets one heavy hand on Mouth’s shoulder, the other on Stache’s. “It was good talking with you, Jon. Congrats again. See you during the season.” He turns Mouth and Stache around, squeezes their shoulders, and leads them away.

“Mambas! Bring it in!” Coach Mac claps and calls us to center court. “I know y’all’s families are here, so I’ll be quick.”

We gather in a sweaty, exhausted circle around Coach Mac, the dual reality of our championship victory and the end of camp settling on our shoulders.

“It’s been a great week.” He wipes sweat from his forehead and scans each of our faces, his eyes sharp and proud. “Your work has paid off. Each and every

one of you is leaving here better than when you came in. I want you to take this momentum through your summer. Don't get home and crash on the couch. Get home and keep working. Attitude and effort. Take control. Pivot when you need to. Never be afraid to fail. Yeah?"

"Yes, Coach!" We all nod, and a couple guys hold out their hands for fist bumps. Coach pauses. "All right, line up for a team photo and then get outta here before I make you run laps."

We break into two lines, and the camp photographer snaps a quick shot. Then I hear my mom's voice, along with all the other moms—"Wait! Stay there! I want a photo too!"

Trey leans over and groans. "Oh, man, we'll never get out of here now."

"Which one is your mom?" I ask.

Trey points to a tall and classy woman, front and center of the group, dressed in a crisp sundress with big sunglasses perched on top of her head.

"Mine is there, on the end." I point.

"Is she wearing a Cougars T-shirt? Accidentally taking a selfie right now?"

I laugh. *Yep. That's my mom.*

And I wouldn't trade her, or the rest of my family, for anything in the world.

CHAPTER

40



After the last photo has been snapped, I wave at my mom. She smiles with her whole face and wipes tears from her eyes. I turn to head toward her, but Coach Robinson catches my shoulder.

“Jon, hang back a sec.” He folds his arms, studying me like he’s still reading the game.

“Yeah, Coach?”

“You’ve had quite a week, huh?”

My ears feel warm, like they started glowing bright red. “Yes, sir. I have a lot to work on before 7th grade.”

Coach chuckles. “You and everybody else.” He removes his visor and wipes sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “I’ve been keeping tabs on you all week. Even though you got off to a rocky start, your mental toughness improved every time you were on the court. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, Coach.”

He pats my shoulder and tugs his visor back onto his

head. "I need to say goodbye to a couple of my players. Attitude and effort, Spencer. See you in the fall."

Coach Robinson strides toward a couple of girls and their parents, and I feel a bubble of pride swell in my chest.

Then someone taps on my shoulder, and I whirl around.

"Hey. Incredible game. What a shot!" Sammie's smiling up at me.

"Thanks. Coming from you, that's quite the compliment."

"Thank you." She flips her ponytail to the opposite shoulder. "You know, somebody owes me a sundae."

How could I forget? "Hot fudge. No peanuts."

"Maybe I could get your number? We could stay in touch. My friends like to go to the Burger Barn on 17th Street. We could all hang out sometime if you want." She hands me her phone.

"Uh, yeah, sure." Her phone is warm in my hands. I push that observation out of my head and focus on spelling my name. J. Start with the letter J. I thumb letters and numbers onto her phone screen.

Quit being such a dork, you're just giving your contact info to a new friend. That's all.

"Great. I'll text you." She walks off, passing right by my family.

Sammie notices Sarah staring at her as she walks past, and she smiles.

Coach Mac walks up and extends his hand for me to shake. “Good work this week, Jon. I expect to see you next year.”

“Thanks, Coach.” I shake his hand and wave my parents over. “This is my family.”

Coach Mac smiles. “Glad to meet you.”

“Are you really famous, or just internet famous?” Alec asks.

Coach Mac bursts into laughter. “I don’t even know how to answer that.” He kneels. “You’re famous around here too, you know. Is your other brother here?”

“He’s with his grandma.” Dad shakes Coach Mac’s hand. “Thanks for your understanding about all that. Craig Spencer. This is my dad, Jon’s granddad.”

“I’m just glad he’s okay.” Coach Mac pauses and squints at Grandad. “You wouldn’t happen to be Steve Spencer, would you?”

Dad looks just as surprised as I feel. “You know my dad?”

“It’s a huge honor to meet you, sir.” Coach Mac reaches out and shakes Grandad’s hand. “Coach Robinson told me about your days at North Texas. Said you were a shooter. I should’ve guessed y’all were related.”

Grandad smiles, and Coach Mac enthusiastically pats my back. “No wonder you’ve got that stroke. You keep growing that toughness, and we’ll see just how far you can go.” He nods and heads over to greet another family, leaving Dad and Grandad looking stunned and thrilled at the same time.

“Sweetheart, you were so great out there!” Mom practically tackles me to the ground, she hugs me so hard. “It’s so fun watching you play! You looked like you were having the best time.”

“Yeah, I had a great time.” I untangle myself from Mom’s grip. “Winning didn’t hurt, either.” Mom laughs and wipes her eyes again.

“You leveled up your game this week, kiddo.” Grandad fist bumps my free hand.

“Thanks, Grandad.” I take a deep breath, feeling my parents’ pride nestle in around me.

We won the championship, and camp is over, but it sure feels like something bigger is about to begin.

CHAPTER

41



Later that summer...

Heat rises from the concrete driveway in thick, slow waves. Trey and I keep moving. We're playing first to eleven points wins, and I'm not slowing down. I jab-step, testing Trey's defense. He stays low, hands up, eyes locked on mine.

"You're getting predictable. You always hesitate before you drive." Trey raises his voice over the cicadas chirping.

I smirk. "Oh, yeah?" I fake right, spin left, and power to the hoop.

Trey anticipates it and slides into my path.

I absorb the contact and flip a one-handed shot off the backboard.

"In your face," I say as the ball drops through the net.

Trey shakes his head, grinning. "I see you."

We grab our water bottles and make our way to the shade of the front porch. Ian and Alec peer out from behind the Lego tower they've spent all morning building. Ian's looking better than he has all summer. Sarah sits cross-legged, squinting hard at the ground, concentrating on her artwork. I think it's artwork. It's a chalk drawing of something. Maybe a lopsided cat with wings.

"What's that supposed to be?" Trey asks.

I elbow him in the ribs. It's obvious he only has older siblings.

Sarah doesn't even look up. "It's a flying tiger, obviously."

"Obviously," I nod.

"Cool." Trey elbows me. "Another game? Best three out of five?"

Before I can answer, a familiar voice rises above the cicadas.

"What's going on?"

"Mason!" I rush over to fist bump my best friend, but he takes a step backward down the driveway. "Dude, am I glad to see you!"

"Maaayy-sonn!" Sarah jumps up from her artwork, dashes to his side, and flings her arms around him in a big hug. "Want to see my picture?"

"Not right now, Sarah." Mason peels away from her hug, his expression swirling. "What is Slammo doing here?"

"Trey? We're getting ready for tryouts. Want to shoot

with us?”

“Trey?” Mason’s tone could shatter a glass backboard.

“Sup, Barnes.” Trey bounces the ball to him. “Shoot with us, man.”

Mason catches the ball with both hands and pulls it close to his chest. He stares at Trey, then at me, and opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, but doesn’t.

My gut sinks like a guilty anchor to the bottom of my feet. I wasn’t super great about texting Mason when I got back from camp. I meant to tell him everything when he got back from Tulsa. “Look man, I can explain.”

Mason throws me an overly aggressive pass that hits me in the gut. “I gotta go.”

“Dude, wait.”

But Mason has already turned his back and is jogging down the street.

“What’s up with him?” Trey asks.

“I dunno.”

Trey takes the ball out of my hands. “Let’s go again.”

He’s right. Seventh grade is a few weeks away, and we have work to do.

Trey’s not Slammo anymore. We’re all about to be teammates. Mason will see that soon enough. He’ll come around...I think.

THE END

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. At the beginning of camp, Jon struggled with pressure and self-doubt. What lessons has he learned by the end of the story?
2. How do Jon's actions during the championship game show the kind of player and teammate he has become?
3. The story ends with Mason walking away. Why might Mason react like this, and what do you think might happen next?